

This Woman Alone:

Approaches to the Earliest *Vitae* of Brigit of Kildare

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Declaration

I hereby declare that all work contained within this thesis has been composed by myself, and that the work is my own. None of this work has been submitted for any other degree or qualification other than this degree.

Thomas Torma

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Abstract

Irish Hagiography, long dismissed as aesthetically barren and historically useless, has recently, due to the labours of Máire Herbert, Richard Sharpe, Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin, and others gained respectability as a means of understanding history. However, appreciation of these hagiographical texts as socio-literary documents in their own right has yet to be fully realised. Although works have focused on particular aspects of particular saints, a complete study of the *vitae* of a particular saint has not yet been attempted. This study aims to understand, in a more rounded way than previously attempted, the earliest lives of Saint Brigit of Kildare.

Part one of the thesis is a historical overview of the history and development of the church and the *cultus sanctus* both in Western Christendom, and more narrowly within Ireland. It is hoped that by placing Brigit within this social and historical framework we will be better able to understand the motives and aims that her biographers had when they assembled her *vitae*. Part two of the thesis is concerned with attempting to understand the construction of the Brigidine dossier itself. The first chapter is a study of Brigit's childhood and upbringing, focusing on her early designation as a special and gifted child. Chapter two examines the role that gender played in the Brigidine corpus, and how she was able to become one of the most powerful saints in Ireland despite her sex. The third chapter is an examination of Brigit's relationship with Saint Patrick in the hagiographical texts, and shows how and why Brigit played a subordinate role to Patrick in both the Patrician and the Brigidine dossier. The thesis concludes with an analysis of the miracles associated with Brigit. It shows how strategic are miracles involving bounty and food production and demonstrates how these, and her other miracles, were used by the Brigidine authors both to portray Brigit in a positive and powerful light, and to promote the interests of their cult.

It is hoped that this study will be of value both to scholars of hagiography in general, and to those labouring to advance understanding in the field of Brigidine studies. Furthermore, this thesis is intended as a contribution to the elucidation of hagiography as a tool for understanding history.

A Note on Translation

I have, of course, consulted existing translations wherever these are available, and I am often indebted to them for a turn of phrase.

This thesis centres around three early Brigidine lives, the Latin *Vita I*, and *Vita II*, and the Old Irish *Bethu Brigte*. For these texts, I have used my own translations, based on extant editions. For the text of *Vita I*, I have used Connolly's unpublished edition in his PhD thesis from University College Dublin (1970). For the *Vita II*, I have used Migne's edition in the *Patrologia Latina*. This work lacks the Latin text corresponding to §§22 and 32 of Connolly and Picard's translation, due to the poor quality of Migne's manuscript, and §12, which was suppressed by Migne himself presumably on the grounds that it contained a description of Brigit aborting a pregnancy. For the purposes of translation, I have consulted Connolly's translation of the *Vita I* in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* (1989), and Connolly and Picard's translation of the *Vita II* in the same journal (1987). Although the translations are my own, I have followed their paragraph numbering for the sake of the ease of the reader.

For *Bethu Brigte* I have used the edition by Professor Ó hAodha, and his translations have also been a useful guide in my own translations of that text.

Note that in the case of the writings of Patrick, I believe his difficult Latin has been best rendered by Alan Hood, and therefore I have consistently used Mr. Hood's translations of the *Confessio* and *Epistola* of Patrick.

Abbreviations

Acta SS	Acta Sanctorum
ACM	Annals of Clonmacnoise
Ambrose Ep.	The Letters of S. Ambrose Bishop of Milan
AU	Annals of Ulster
BSS	<i>Bibliotheca Sanctorum</i> ed. Istituto Giovanni
CCH	Collectio Canonum Hibernensis
CIH	Corpus Iuris Hiberniae
CMT	Cath Maige Tuired
Conf.	Confessio (St. Patrick)
CS	Chronicon Scotorum
EEM	The Adventure of the Sons of Eochaid Murgmedón
EpC.	Epistola (St. Patrick)
HE	Bede: Ecclesiastical History of the English People
Isernaeus	The Third Book of St. Isernaeus
LGE	Against Heresies
LL	Lebor Gabála Érenn
MT	The Book of Leinster
MU	Monastery of Tallaght
Oneirocritica	Mesca Ulad
PL	Artemidorus –
Salmanticensis	The Interpretation of Dreams: Oneirocritica
TBCI	Patrologia Latina
TBC LL	Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae ex Codice Olim
VC	Salmanticensi Nunc Bruxellensi
Vita I	Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I
Vita II	Táin Bó Cúailnge: Book of Leinster Recension
VM	Adomnán of Iona: Life Of St Columba
VSH	Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae
	(The First Latin Life of Saint Brigit)
	Sanctae Brigidae Virginis Vita
	(The Second Latin Life of Saint Brigit)
	Saint Martin of Tours:
	The Chronicles of Sulpicius Severus
	Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae

Introduction

Brigit is an exceptional saint. Second, possibly only to Patrick amongst Irish saints in the popular imagination today; she has shown herself to be a durable figure with the capacity to captivate and interest people through the centuries. We continue to name daughters, churches, streets and places after a figure who possibly might not have existed in history. Brigit is a figure who had the strength to operate in a world dominated by men, and whose cult achieved a status equalled only by Patrick and Columba. This is largely due to the fact that she lacks the more terrifying aspects of other strong Irish literary women such as the Morrígan, Medb, or Macha, allowing her to achieve a comparable high ranking position, and also to become a popular and beloved figure. She also avoids many of the almost masochistic trapping of many early female saints that we find in the contemporary hagiography of western Christendom in general.

However, the cult of Brigit was not confined only to Ireland. Indeed, Richard Sharpe estimates that there were about 25 copies of the longer *First Life of Saint Brigit (Vita I)*, while he places the number of copies of the shorter life by Cogitosus (*Vita II*) at 'well over sixty' (1982: 82). All the early Latin texts only survived in manuscripts from outside of Ireland. The third text upon which this study is based is the circa ninth century Old Irish *Bethu Brigte*, which survives exclusively in the *Rawlinson B. 512* manuscript (Ó hAodha 1978: ix, xxvii), thus this account is the only extant early Brigidine work to have survived in Ireland. Indeed, a major focus for studies into Brigit has been on the distribution of her cult throughout Continental Europe and the British Isles. Bowen focused on the distribution of Brigit dedications

throughout the Celtic speaking world (1973-74: 33-47), while Breeze and Young focused on her cult in Spain and Italy respectively (Breeze 1988: 85-95, Young 1998: 13-26, 1998-99: 251-255). While it must be noted that Breeze was predominantly concerned with a specific shrine in Olite, the foundation of which he dates to the twelfth century (1988: 94-95), all three scholars attribute the widespread popularity of Brigit to the phenomenon of *peregrinatio*, the travelling of the Irish scholars throughout Europe. In particular, Young has recently argued that the Brigit of Fiesole in Tuscany, who according to tradition was believed to have lived during the ninth century, was simply a folk explanation, which attempted to localise a dedication to Brigit of Kildare. Young argues that the foundation at Fiesole was originally a site dedicated to Saint Brigit by the Irish bishop Donatus while he was living in Tuscany (1998-99: 251-55).

In spite of this widespread popularity, there have not been any serious studies on how Brigit operated as literary construct. As we shall see, there have been numerous attempts to establish a relative chronology of the texts, and Ó Catháin has attempted a major study of the modern folklore surrounding Brigit (1995). When Brigit has been mentioned in numerous other studies, it is often on the assumption that her biography has been heavily influenced by a pagan deity of the same name. This belief is often supported by the fact that her festival day fell on the first of February, the same date as the presumably pre-Christian quarter-day named Imbolc (Kenney 1929: 357-58, Bowen 1973-74: 33, Ó Catháin 1995: ix, Green 1995: 198-202, *inter alia.*). While it would seem likely that the goddess of the same name would have influenced the biography of the Christian saint, we cannot ignore the fact the

Brigit in the earliest texts was regarded as not only just a Christian figure but also a paragon for Christian behaviour.

It is the aim of this study to examine how Brigit, as a literary figure, was constructed to convey a religious message. This, of course, assumes that the texts with which we are dealing are either not factual, or at the very least, have been highly elaborated by oral retelling and by the author of the texts. By examining specific motifs, namely childhood, gender, Patrick and other members of the clergy, and finally feasting, I intend to gain a greater understanding of what aims the texts are trying to achieve and how they are attempting to achieve them. While the aim of this study is not historical, it goes without saying that attempting to understand Irish hagiography requires an understanding of the historical contexts in which it was written, namely the context of both early medieval Ireland and early medieval Christianity. I also trust that this study will be of use to historians; as they attempt to use hagiography to understand the past, an understanding of how the texts operate as literature may serve a useful purpose.

In the realm of hagiography and legend, one of the most commonly asked questions is that of the historicity of the saintly figure. While for many figures, this question becomes a key focus to the scholars who approach the figure, the only well serious scholar who has attempted to find an historical person behind Brigit has been Macalister (1919: 340-41). He believed that Brigit was a pagan priestess who had converted both herself and her alleged priestess community to the new faith. Macalister argued that 'no Christian lady would willingly bear a name so heathenish while paganism was still a force,' but that her popular association with the pagan name stuck, and as a result, her Christian name was forgotten (1919: 341).

Unfortunately, he had no admissible evidence to support his hypothesis, so his conclusion remains an interesting theory, but ultimately one that must remain, at best, unproven.

A useful approach to the history of legendary figures has been set out by Thomas Charles-Edwards in dealing with the figure of King Arthur. His argument is worth repeating in full:

More than one question may be asked by an historian about a person such as Arthur. There is the familiar one, asked perhaps a little anxiously: Was Arthur a real person? With a little more knowledge of the ways in which the minds of historians work, a further question may be put: Is there anything valuable which an historian can say about Arthur himself as opposed to his later manifestations in poetry, story and hagiography? And finally, with even more awareness of the canons of historical criticism, one may ask a question, not about the real, or supposedly real, Arthur, but about the accounts of him given in such texts as the *Historia Brittonum*: what was a given text's perception of Arthur? (Charles-Edwards 1991: 15)

While the *Historia Brittonum* may not be a text by which to gain an understanding of Saint Brigit, the same general questions may be asked about Brigit as Charles-Edwards asked about King Arthur, namely, what was a given text's, or group of texts', perception of that figure. Indeed, this paper will not even begin to attempt to uncover any possible historical figure behind the Brigit of Cogitosus and the anonymous authors of the *Vita I* and *Bethu Brigitte*.

One obvious answer to the question of the perception of the Brigidine lives is that Brigit was seen as a holy and pious Christian woman. However, this is not a complete answer; there are a number of other factors that have shaped the development of Brigit as a literary figure. Our various authors seem to have had a large tradition from which to draw. Cogitosus himself admits that he has based his text on the tales told by those around him: '... ideo pauca de pluribus a majoribus et

peritissimis tradita, sine ulla ambiguitatis caligine...'(Vita II Prologue).¹ This would certainly seem to imply that the broader literary community, be it ecclesiastical or secular, had an impact on the development of Brigit as a literary figure.

However, we cannot ignore the fact that those texts probably also reflected the political, religious, and secular interests of their authors, and more broadly the Brigidine community. How these concerns manifest themselves is made clear in Máire Herbert's *Iona, Kells, and Derry* (1996b), which chronicles the impact of the interests of the Columban *familia* on the Columban hagiography. Herbert argued that Adomnán, who also claimed to have based his work on the wisdom of learned men (VC Second Preface, 105), was influenced by concerns over the impact that the Paschal controversy and other issues taken up at the Synod of Whitby might have had on his cult (1996b: 142-48).

The Brigidine authors were not free from such concerns. Indeed, we shall see that the relationship between Patrick and Brigit as portrayed in the texts is heavily influenced by relations between Armagh and Kildare, the respective centres of their cults. However, it also needs to be understood how the literature itself operated. It was easy enough for churches simply to list their claims, even within the hagiography, as is seen within the *Collectanea* attributed to Tírechán. But hagiography is a much richer and varied genre than simple lists. As with most literary genres, it reflects a wide range of interests and concerns, as well as stylistic and cultural features. While the hagiographical texts are not historical, they do offer

¹ ... a small portion of the many things passed down by elders and most learned people, without the darkness of ambiguity...[§Prologue]

us a glimpse of the historical concerns of the communities they represent as well as the culture in which the history played itself out.

The Texts

This thesis focuses on the earliest Brigidine texts, notably the *Vita II*, *Vita I*, and *Bethu Brigitte*. These texts belong to the earliest stratum of Irish hagiography, and form the base from which later Brigidine traditions were to develop. Sharpe places these texts in the earliest stages of hagiographical development in Ireland. Cogitosus's *Vita II*, along with the *Vitae* of Patrick by Muirchú, the *Collectanea* of Tírechán, and Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* form the corpus of Irish hagiographical texts that can confidently be dated to the seventh century (Sharpe 1991: 14). As we shall see, the *Vita I* seems to have incorporated the *Vita II* as well as earlier lives written by Ultán of Ardraccan and Ailerán of Clonard. These two seventh century authors were also credited with having written lives of both Patrick and Brigit. (McCone 1982: 114-17). If this is so, the *Vita I* would seem to represent a broad reading of the earliest Brigidine traditions from the same period as Cogitosus. However, it seems to have been edited in the eighth or ninth centuries, and we can be fairly certain that the text represents some of the concerns of the editors of that time. The final text, the *Bethu Brigitte*, belongs to the ninth century, when we begin to see a shift from writing saints lives in Latin to writing them in the vernacular (Sharpe 1991: 19-20). The Old Irish *Bethu Brigitte* is closely related to the earliest sections of the *Vita I*, possibly the result of an interlinear gloss of that text or one of the texts that it is composed from, and represents the earliest vernacular Irish hagiographical text.

In addition to these earliest *vitae* of Brigit, there are a number of other texts that figure predominantly in the Brigidine tradition. Notable among these are *Ultán's Hymn*, also known as *Brigit bé bithmaith* and *Broccán's Hymn*, also known as *Ní car Brigit*. Both of these Old Irish hymns are to be found in the *Liber Hymnorum*, together with extensive scribal notes. Although brief, and not a part of the actual biography of the saint, these early verse texts help to illuminate certain themes that occur within the biographical texts. Of course, the Brigidine texts were not written in a vacuum, therefore numerous non-Brigidine texts will be used to help understand the context in which they were written. Of particular importance will be the Patrician texts, notably the early ninth century Old Irish *Bethu Phátraic* also known as the *Tripartite Life of Patrick*. As we shall see, relations between Patrick and Brigit and this text along with the eighth century *Liber Angeli* form a crucial part of understanding the relations between these two figures.

The Chapters

Since the aim of this thesis is to understand how the Brigidine texts operate and function as a Christian biography, it is important to understand the context within which she is operating. Studies by scholars such as Kathleen Hughes and Wendy Davies into the nature of the church in Ireland have moved away from a view that there was some sort of a distinction between the supposed 'Celtic Church' and the broader Church of Rome (Hughes 1981, Davies 1992). Both Hughes and Sharpe have pointed out ways in which the church in Ireland was responsive to the authority of Rome (Sharpe 1984b, Hughes 1965). As we shall see, Patrick's *Confessio* was a response to the authority of British church. Additionally, we find numerous

examples of the church in Celtic lands conforming to the decisions of Rome, most famously at the Synod of Whitby, which eventually forced the Columban *familia*, to capitulate to the decisions of King Oswiu regarding the Paschal controversy (*HE* III.25). In §90 of the *Vita I* Brigit sends a delegation to retrieve the proper masses from Rome, only to send them back when they return because she has realised that the mass has changed again. In other words, the church in Ireland existed in a context in which Rome was a constant feature in the background. This is witnessed by the fact that the church in Ireland was familiar with the writings of the church fathers and doctors, as is demonstrated by Thomas Clancy and Gilbert Márkus's lists of texts contained in the library of Iona (Clancy and Markus 1995: 211-222).²

With this in mind, the first section of this thesis begins by examining the origins and development of the *Cultus Sanctus*. As a result of the persecutions of early Christians by the pagan Romans, there were a large number of martyrs for the faith. The veneration of these brave people was eventually institutionalised and regulated by the leading church figures, notably Ambrose, in an attempt to make the religion more appealing to mainstream Roman culture. As a result, the relics of the holy dead were brought into the church and placed under the altar (Brown 1981: 37). These relics were seen as a means of directly contacting the saint, who was now residing in heaven and could contact God directly as a reward for the faith of the supplicant. The intercessory aspect of the saint made the figure more powerful in death than in life. In addition to controlling some of the more unorthodox practices

² It should be noted that this list is itself based largely on two other works, by Brüning (1917) and Thomas O' Loughlin (1994), which was still forthcoming at the time when Clancy and Marks published.

within the early church, such control of holy items allowed the young faith to increase its revenues (Brown 1981: 33, Abou-El-Haj 1994: 8).

One of the most important developments within the cult was the writing of the biographies of the saints. Originally, these texts were simply martyrologies; brief descriptions of the deaths of those persecuted by the Romans. While these texts were beginning to develop into a more biographical description of the martyrs, this change from simple martyrologies to full biographies seems to have been advanced with the ending of the persecutions. Once the faithful were no longer persecuted, new holy people were sought. Especially predominant among them were the ascetics. Originally a movement pioneered by the desert fathers, most famously Saint Anthony of Egypt, the ascetics soon found adherents in other parts of Christendom. One of the most famous of these was Saint Martin of Tours, whose biography by Sulpicius Severus became one of the most important and influential hagiographical texts (Richter 1999: 225-231).

Having surveyed the development of both the Christian faith and the hagiographical genre, Section One outlines the development of the faith in Ireland. The most important figure to understand in this process is Saint Patrick; widely credited as being the apostle of the Irish, his writings are almost the only extant sources that we can be sure date from the period of regular contact with the pagan Irish. The mission work of Patrick, and presumably other early missionaries in Ireland, set up the institutions that would come to dominate the church in Ireland. Most notable was their success in promoting monasticism within Ireland. Of course, the church expanded and developed from this time, and by the time of the earliest extensive texts that have survived, which include our *Vita II*, we find a church with a

strong monastic base. But this is not the whole story. Drawing on, and predominantly agreeing with the recent works of Etchingham (1991, 1993, 1999), Charles-Edwards (1992, 2000) and Sharpe (1984, 1992), I have argued that there was a stronger pastoral element in the early medieval Irish church than has generally been realised. From the time of the earliest seventh century Christian writings in Ireland, we find that the *Cultus Sanctus* had become firmly entrenched. The earliest lives seem to have drawn from the works of continental hagiography, most notably Sulpicius Severus' *Vita Martini*, whose division of the text into four sections can perhaps be seen echoed in the works by Cogitosus and Adomnán.

The first section concludes with a study of the development and evolution of the early Brigidine hagiographical texts. By detailed examination, and by fresh consideration of the views of numerous other modern scholars who have attempted to deal with this topic, I have attempted to create a relative chronology of the three early texts. Briefly, I have argued that the *Vita II* is the earliest extant Brigidine *vita* and is a source, along with lost lives by Ultán and Ailerán, for the *Vita I*. These are both post-dated by the Old Irish *Bethu Brigte*, which may have begun life as an interlinear gloss on either *Vita I* or one of a number of the now lost early Brigidine texts.

The second section of this thesis is divided into four parts, each one approaching a different theme in the Brigidine lives. The first two parts deal with how Brigit was constructed as a saint. The first begins with the chronologically early part of Brigit's biography, from an unborn child up to her accidental ordination as a bishop. This period, which is described in the *Vita I* and *Bethu Brigte*, is the only area in the texts where a chronological narrative is attempted, rather than an assorted listing of the miracles that she was believed to have performed. As we shall see,

Brigit's early upbringing neatly conforms to the canons of the international heroic biography. For example, she was born the child of a nobleman and slave, and her birth had been foretold by sign, portents, and prophecies by both clergy and druids.

One of the ways that Brigit's specialness was designated was through her liminal nature. Liminality is one of the hallmarks of the hero, and this is especially true for the saint. One of the saint's main roles is to act as an intercessor between this world and the next (Noble and Head 1995: xv). This is especially true once the saint has died; after death the saint's soul was believed to be in heaven, while the relics remained present in this world. Brigit's liminal nature was confirmed from the earliest episodes in her biography. For example, she was born with her mother straddling a threshold at dawn, while holding milk so fresh that it was still warm. Another symbol of Brigit's special nature was the use of fire symbolism. Fire symbolism, often attributed to Brigit's pagan namesake, is also a potent biblical symbol of the divine made manifest. In Brigit's case it also serves a Levi-Straussian function, transforming the girl from ordinary person, into a holy saint. Indeed, these fire miracles cease once Brigit has been ordained.

Although Brigit's ordination was to make her a bishop, a typically masculine role, she remained a woman, and her ability to act within society was thus curtailed by her gender. Throughout the writings of the early church fathers, we find a consistent belief that women are more prone to sin and lust than men. This weakness was generally believed to be the result of an excess in the body. While there were different theories as to what this excess was, whether it was fluids, blood, heat or another source, the result was that women faced a greater struggle to overcome their desires. Ascetic texts, such as the *Monastery of Tallaght*, indicate that similar ideas

had been imported into Ireland.³ However, Brigit does not engage in any protracted asceticism, and actively engages with both sexes in the secular and religious worlds. There are a number of reasons for this, including her ordination as a bishop and the fact that she belonged to a generation of saints that were regarded as particularly holy. However, Brigit was still a woman, and her *vitae* reflect this in a number of ways. Notably, Brigit lacks the confrontational attitude that we find in the *vitae* of other national saints such as Patrick and Columba. Furthermore, many of her miracles focus on regulation of the hearth and home, an area that traditionally was the domain of women in early Ireland.

Before we can begin to understand how the Brigidine dossier worked to promote the interests of Kildare in the texts, we first need to establish her relationship with Patrick, and thus Armagh. The third chapter begins with an analysis of the supposed agreement between Armagh and Kildare that, it was argued, happened between the writing of the *Vita II* and the *Liber Angeli*. The *Liber Angeli* describes a division of Ireland between Patrick and Brigit, giving Leinster to Kildare, and the rest of Ireland to Patrick (*Liber Angeli* [XI 3] (32)). This chapter aims to understand how this relationship is manifested in the hagiographical relationship between Patrick and Brigit, as well as between Brigit and Patrick's bishops. Oddly, Patrick is consistently shown as the superior saint in the extremely friendly relationship between the two saints as depicted in the Brigidine dossier, while Brigit is shown as the superior to his bishops. If the relationship in the hagiography somehow represented aspirations of the monasteries of the Brigidine and Patrician

³ I look forward to Morgyn Wagner's forthcoming thesis which will deal with this topic in greater detail.

cults, then it is an accurate reflection of the relationship described in the *Liber Angeli* and *Ultán's Hymn*, with Brigit, and presumably therefore Kildare, second, but almost equal to Patrick and his cult at Armagh.

Finally, the thesis ends with an analysis of the miraculous bounties with which Brigit was often associated. Although Brigit was not able to advance her claims in the same manner as male saints, she was nevertheless a figure who was capable of defending the interests of her *paruchia*. While a figure that was associated with food abundance and protection of the economically important livestock may not have been easy to reconcile with the asceticism expected from women, abundance was used by the authors of her *vitae* to promote their cause. Drawing on the works of Mauss (1967) and Philip O'Leary (1984), this work examines the abundance associated with Brigit, and concludes that it was used to put those around her into a kind of debt. Other saints give their churches to her, kings give her their kingdoms, and druids were compelled to convert after being given a feast. Additionally, in a pastoral society protection of the livestock would have been an effective means of gaining popular support for our saint.

In her earliest appearances, Brigit operates on many different levels. When approached as a figure of literature, Brigit appears as a strong and independent figure, whose sanctity is apparent from before she left the womb. The authors of the texts were able to promote the interests of the cult and of their saint despite the restrictions to which Brigit, being a woman, was subjected. This promotion was present despite Brigit's, and thus Kildare's, visible subordinate position to Patrick and Armagh. As a result, Brigit is one of the most dynamic of early Irish saints. These texts helped to

give rise to one of the most powerful communities in Ireland, and her popularity endured well beyond the time of the writing of these texts.

Section 1

Chapter 1

The Rise of the Early Cult of Saints

The study of the early cult of saints is a complex and wide-ranging field, and could easily be, indeed has been, the topic of many theses, books, and papers. What is attempted here is not a comprehensive or complete study of the field. Instead, this chapter is a brief outline of the field, with the aim of placing Saint Brigit in her broadest context. As we shall see in a later chapter, the cult in Ireland took on many unique attributes. Indeed, only a few saints from outside Ireland, such as Peter, Paul, Michael, and Martin of Tours, play a significant role in the devotional record of Ireland (Herbert 1996: 90). This is not to say that Irish hagiography was isolated from that of the rest of Europe. The cult arrived from Europe and continued to have much in common with that of the rest of Christendom. Much of the apparent variety seen in Irish hagiography is simply part of the tendency for local development of the cult of saints to occur. Indeed, it was its ability to localise the Christian faith outwith the Holy Land, and to teach the new set of ethics and morals in a locally relevant way that allowed the cult of saints to become so powerful.

A modern study in this field is fraught with difficulties. The sources are complex and over generalisation is an easy trap to fall into, if not an impossible one to avoid in such a brief survey as this. Additionally, there is no one orthodoxy in modern research, and although some have argued that this diffusion confuses the field (Geary 1996: 2), others see it as a difficulty outweighed by the benefits of diversity in a flourishing field (Herbert 1996: 81). Heffernan rightly comments that

the field of hagiography, in spite of being one of the largest bodies of writing that we have from the Middle Ages, has not received as much attention as it deserves in the modern age. It has generally been ignored by historians because it tends to lack documentary evidence, and by literature scholars who often see the material as lacking in aesthetic quality (Heffernan 1988: 17). However, modern hagiographic studies have been with us for quite a while. For many scholars the date of the beginnings of modern hagiographic research was the *Acta Sanctorum*, which was first published in 1643. The field has been growing and flourishing ever since, with a great debt owed to the Bollandists, who have contributed greatly to the field. More recently hagiography has been the subject of several important studies (Weinstein and Bell 1982: 2, Herbert 1996: 79).⁴

Before beginning to examine the actual *vitae* of the saints, we must first understand the context in which saints and their cults emerged. Wilson has argued that it is a widespread popular notion that the cult of saints was some sort of pagan survival that the church has preserved through the ages (1983: 2). Indeed, many of the practices of the cult bore functional similarities to pagan and Jewish antecedents, with adherents aiming for specific objectives such as healing, good luck, and material abundance through adherence to specific cultic practices (Noble and Head 1995: xix). However, it could be argued that these are almost universal functions of religion throughout the world. As these are broad concerns for people in any society, it should therefore be expected to show up in Christianity, Judaism, and the pagan religions of Europe, as well as the wide range of religions throughout the world. We

⁴ For a complete review of modern hagiographic scholarship see Herbert (1996: 79-81) and Geary (1996: 1-23).

can safely say that those who participated in the early cult of saints certainly did not think of their practices as pagan; many of the ritual practices of the cult would not have fitted easily into classical pagan society (Brown 1981: 29). Furthermore, Noble and Head claim that while the function may have been similar, if not indistinguishable, the outcome was tied in with the Christian notions of salvation and grace rather than the more classical notion of gains and favour in this world. The saint rewarded those who were the most faithful, not simply those who had made the proper or best sacrifices. The distinction here is seemingly vague, as a demonstration of faith often involved making donations, alms, or gifts to the church, especially by those who could afford it. However, the difference lies in the ideological terms, it was the faith that the donation represented rather than the donation itself that mattered. As for the saints themselves, their ability to achieve miraculous material gain and favour, usually for others, was a sign of their divine election (Noble and Head 1995: xix). Wilson has argued that the similarity of some pagan rituals with Christian rituals can be seen more as a process of conquest rather than just absorption, by which the church hoped to gain converts while not alienating the converted. Over time, the pagan aspects of the rituals were forgotten about and the rituals themselves came to be seen as acts of pure Christian devotion (Wilson 1983: 2).

The cult of saints itself was a process by which people sought the favour and patronage of the saints through faith and prayers, often demonstrated with feasts, gifts and services. The aim of this was to utilise the saint's position as an intercessor between the material world and the spiritual one. As we shall see, the saint was present in both Earth and Heaven, and was therefore able to communicate in heaven

on behalf of those still living. Even though the cult practices were mostly based at the local level, Noble and Head argue that the cult did take on two general forms. The first of these was liturgically based, where the community would celebrate the local patron on his feast day through prayer, readings, and processions. The second was the use of relics, such as body parts, personal possessions, and tokens that had made physical contact with the saint (Noble and Head 1995: xvi). The natural laws were often suspended for the saint due to divine favour. As soldiers of Christ, it was believed that saints had tremendous power, or more accurately were conduits of divine power, during their lifetimes. The prayers of these elected individuals were extremely effective. The most important thing about the cult was that the saints guided other people towards a faithful life and eventually salvation. This was not the only important act of the saint, indeed they were often able to heal, resolve disputes, perform miracles and influence politics as signs of their action in this world. All of these earthly benefits may have given the cult more influence over the public imagination than the more distant notion of salvation. It was not until the moment of death that the saints achieved their highest level of power. Once the saint had died and gone to Heaven, their intervention was at its most widespread and effective (Noble and Head 1995: xv). The reason for this was that while each saint was physically still present in this world, with the relics as a sort of anchor into it, he was also spiritually present in heaven. Such a liminal state allowed for direct intervention on the spiritual realm on behalf of believers.

These powers could have been very important in the face of persecution by the Romans. Ironically, it was these very persecutions that gave the Christian faith the means by which they could create a sense of identity and historical consciousness

(Noble and Head 1995: xxi). Originally, the Greek (*hagios*) and Latin (*sanctus*) terms for saint were applied to all baptised members of the early church, both living and dead (Wilson 1983: 2). Gradually, the term came to apply to those who died for their belief in the face of Roman persecution (Wilson 1983: 2). These brave souls were also called *milites Christi*, and were worthy of entrance to heaven immediately after death as a reward for their faith (Noble and Head 1995: xiv). These people were more commonly called martyrs, from the Greek *martys*, meaning witness. Because of their preference for death instead of compromising with Roman officials against their faith, these bold figures bore the ultimate witness to the suffering and death of Christ (Noble and Head 1995: xix).

The early cult found its beginnings with a focus around the tombs and relics of these martyrs. It is likely that the central position of the tomb within the cult would have been very shocking to the broader Mediterranean world. An example of the contempt for the practice of handling the dead can be seen in Artemidorus of Daldis, writing in the second century CE. He commented that dreaming that you are a tanner is a bad thing, 'for the tanner handles dead bodies and lives outside the city' (*Oneirocritica* 1.51). While this process may not have promoted the faith very well, Peter Brown argues that this process of moving outside of the city, caused the early Christians to see the city as a single unit, which would have had considerable impact on Christian cosmology (1981: 42). The almost necrophilic image of early Christians digging up and affectionately handling bodies buried outside the city, as well as a very high frequency of worship, would not have found much shelter in the classical imagination (Brown 1981: 5). Of course, it should be noted that Christians were not the only people worshipping in the cemeteries, other classical cults, notably the hero

cults also worshipped in the cemeteries. However, the actual handling of the bodies would have been a unique aspect of early Christian ritual (Turcan 1996: 312-315).

Robert Markus has placed the ending of ancient Christianity with the ending of the persecutions and the beginning of freedom of Christian worship (1990: 87-95). As a result the faith became more Romanised and this unrestrained manner of some of the cult adherents was not supported by many of the more classically oriented Christians. The most notable of these objectors was Saint Augustine who saw many of the practices as being pagan, or at least non-Christian and tried to restrict funerary practices at Hippo in 390 (Brown 1981: 26). Wilson points out that the church fathers, especially Jerome, as well as the scholastics felt that proper worship, or *latría*, was due only to God, saints received veneration, or *dulia*, while Mary received *hyperdulia* (Wilson 1983: 4).

One of the most active figures in the process of Romanising the *Cultus Sanctus* was Ambrose, who reformed the cult at Milan in 385. He acquired the relics of Saints Gervasius and Protasius. At this point, relics were often privately owned and not available to the public except by the kindness of the lay owner. Ambrose changed this by placing the relics of these saints under the altar and linking the saint to the liturgy:

Bring these victorious victims to the spot where Christ is the sacrifice. But He, Who suffered for us all, upon the Altar, they, who have been redeemed by His passion, under the Altar. ... That Spot was due to the martyrs. Wherefore let us bury the hallowed relics, placing them in worthy homes, and let us employ the whole day in faithful devotion. (Ambrose *Ep.* 22.13)

Of course, Brown points out that this is only one of the many reforms, which Ambrose initiated at Milan (Brown 1981: 37). The rituals also became more

formalised, random feasting ended in favour of fixed feast days, usually the date of the death of the saint. This change was partially due to the fact that aspects of the veneration of the saints seemed similar to Pagan ceremonies:

When she [Augustine's mother] learnt that the famous preacher and religious leader [Ambrose] had ordered that no such offerings were to be made [at the tombs of the martyrs], even by those who acted soberly, to avert any pretext for intoxication being given to drinkers and because the ceremonies were like meals to propitiate the departed spirits and similar to heathen superstition, she happily abstained.
(Augustine *Confessions* VI.II.ii)

Instead, these gatherings became public affairs presided over by the bishop. The saint became the patron of the church, and the bishop acted as an agent of the saint on Earth (Brown 1981: 31-37). These reforms soon spread throughout the Empire. The Eucharist was to be celebrated at altars, where the relics now were held, rather than at the tombs of the martyrs. Feast dates became associated with the death of the saint, which was also the date of their entrance into heaven and local saints' feast days became incorporated into the calendar (Noble and Head: 1995 xiv). By the Middle Ages, almost every day was either a saint's day or another religious holiday such as Easter. This calendar appears to have been designed to rival the Roman calendar of secular festivals (Wilson 1983: 11, Noble and Head 1995: xxii). While most of the feasts were associated with local saints, some, such as the feasts of saints Peter and Stephen, was almost universally celebrated throughout the western church (Noble and Head 1995: xxii).

This appropriation of the cult by the ruling members of the church was a result of a conflict between wealthy lay-Christians and the rest of the church, including many members of the clergy. Interestingly, this was a problem that the

pagan Romans never had to face, there is no record or indication of there being a division between popular religious practice and those of the financial or political elite (Momigliano 1972: 18). This period has sometimes been called ‘the rise of the cult of saints’, but more likely, it was just the period in which the cult was taken over by the clerical elite of the church and made more accessible to the general public (Brown 1981: 33). This also happened to provide the benefit of securing power and wealth for the clergy (Abou-El-Haj 1994: 8). Additionally, this would have also helped to promote and consolidate the church while accommodating the popular demand for access to these relics. However, it is important to note that though this was a major change, it was not a change in the theology of the church. It was simply a change in liturgical practice. As Augustine points out in his *De Cura Gerenda Pro Mortuis* or *How to Help the Dead*:

I see not how the dead profit from it [burial in the Altar], except that in recalling the place, where lie the bodies of those they have loved, the living may commend their spirits to the prayers and intercession of those saints before God. This they might do even if they could not bury them in these particular places
(c.IV [parenthesis mine]).

In spite of this rather blasé attitude on the part of the author, the *De Cura Gerenda Pro Mortuis* was an entire, albeit short, work by Augustine devoted to the subject of proper handling of the dead. Relics were a crucial element to the cult of saints and crucial to an understanding of the cult of saints. Control over the relics and remains of a saint could be a source of great prosperity and power to a church. From the earliest days of the cult, it was a popular belief that the saint was present in the shrine even while being in Heaven (Wilson 1983: 11, Brown 1981: 3). It was through the

relics that the saint was manifest in the shrine. This example from the tomb of Saint Martin of Tours illustrates this view:

‘Here is Bishop Martin of Tours of sacred memory, whose soul is in the hand of God. But he is completely present here, made manifest to everyone by the goodwill of his miracles.’
(translated in: Van Dam 1993: 315)

While the saint had joined the blessed in heaven, the body, which had been a source of sin and revulsion for the saint, became a conduit for the divine (Wilson 1983: 9). The focus of the cult no longer remained at the tomb of the martyr, but the cult itself began to spread outwards. Indeed, some saints became prominent throughout the whole, or large parts of, western Christendom. As a result it was necessary for the cult relics to become more portable. The corpse, which was frequently believed to be incorruptible, was dismembered and the parts were deposited in the various churches (Wilson 1983: 4). While the western churches initially resisted this practice, it eventually became the norm. Indeed, it was so successful that pieces of cloth dipped into the blood of the holy martyr were often sold as an extension of the body of the saint. This practice was so successful that even things that were not associated with the saint in life could be used to provide an association with the dead saint, for example, oil from lamps near the tomb could even be sold as a relic (Wilson 1983: 4).

By the fourth century, due to centralised ritual practices and organisation, as well as finances, the church had grown considerably in power and size. Of course, the ending of the persecutions and the adoption of the new religion by the emperors helped this process along considerably. While people were still sometimes martyred, for instance, during invasions, doing missionary work, or even while fighting against

other Christian sects, new grounds for the granting of sainthood had to be established. These new grounds were found not in the death of Christ, but in the suffering and good works of Christ, such martyrdom was witnessed by ascetics, founders, pious rulers, and missionary workers. Of these, it was asceticism that was seized upon as a form of martyrdom through suffering. It had been pioneered in the deserts of Egypt by Saint Anthony (†356), but the practice soon spread throughout Europe and the Middle East (Wilson 1983: 3, Brown 1981: 82). Stancliffe has argued that when this practice reached the west in the second half of the fourth century it underwent some dramatic changes. Specifically, it had been grafted onto pagan Roman ascetic practices. Pagan Roman ascetics were often recruited from members of the upper classes who were eager to abandon their wealthy lifestyle. Possibly because of this association with the upper classes we find that Christian asceticism in the west usually appealed to the more elite classes. As a result of this appeal to the elite, western ascetics were not as removed from society as were their eastern counterparts, especially with regard to pastoral and priestly ministries. Furthermore, western ascetics used their education and reading to assist with their preaching to the laity, an option not available to many of the eastern ascetics (Stancliffe 1983: 21, Brown 1981: 82-91). However, both eastern and western ascetics sought purity in the eyes of God through fasting, a spare diet, chastity, and poverty. Noble and Head argue that although, or more likely because, they sought to remove themselves from society, they were often viewed as having great powers and abilities within their respective societies. In particular, women who became ascetics were viewed as having overcome the weakness of their gender and as having become as men (Noble and Head 1995: xxiv). Brown points out that because ascetics were

perceived of as being so pious, they were often called upon to assist in political and social matters. However much this intervention in politics may have been vividly remembered, it still does not account fully for their popularity (Brown 1981: 81).

By the early fifth century the church had accumulated masses of wealth, mostly from inheritance and endowments. It had reached a point where the church needed to find socially acceptable ways of spending this wealth while maintaining its powerful position in society. While the privately wealthy could just spend their way out of the envy their wealth would generate by providing for the needy, the church, at least according to Peter Brown, had reached its limits on spending for the poor, the sick, and other unfortunates. Veneration of the martyrs was one possible way of spending money without provoking the ire of the public (Brown 1981: 40). Almost every place in Christendom at this time had come to have a holy patron or patrons (Wilson 1983: 24). Claims that different churches were trying to make would have often been based on the actions and holiness of their patron. The most famous example of this is probably that Rome's claim to supremacy is based on the fact that her patrons were Peter and Paul. This was often based both on the apparently historical events recorded in the *vitae*, the posthumous miracles, and possession of the body and associated relics (Wilson 1983: 24-25).

From its beginnings, women played a crucial role in the cult of saints. They did not escape persecution from the state, and many, such as Perpetua from Carthage and her slave Felicity, therefore took up the mantle of martyr and saint (*The Martyrdom of Perpetua* 13-17).⁵ When the persecutions ended, women also

⁵ It is worth noting that Perpetua may have subscribed to the Montanist heresy herself (Maitland 1996: 13).

participated in asceticism. These women were often praised for overcoming their gender, and were attributed with many of the same powers as their male counterparts. Many female saints were praised in the *vitae* for acting ‘non muliebriter sed viriliter’ (Schulenburg 1998: 114). These ascetic women often lived in small communities as widows and virgins. These communities were often isolated from any other communities, religious or secular. Like their male counterparts, great powers were often attributed to female ascetics who were especially noted for their healing abilities (Noble and Head 1995: xxiv).

Schulenburg describes how the communities in which the female saints lived were often simply extensions of male communities (1988: 110). The land for the monasteries, both as extensions and as independent foundations, usually came from either the endowment of local nobles or they accompanied wealthy women who wished either to join or establish a community. The foundress, if she was popular and famous enough, could attract large numbers of women to her monastery, sometimes several hundred. Many female saints, including Eustadiola from Bourges (*Eustadiola* §2) and Gloesind in Metz (*Gloesind* §12) as well as Saint Brigit, were foundresses. Most female monastic communities were small, containing about a dozen women; the life span of the community was short as well, usually lasting no more than a generation or two. One particularly important point, especially for our saint, is that it was not uncommon in the *vitae* for joint monasteries to be ruled by an abbess rather than an abbot (Schulenburg 1988: 105-110). As we shall see in a later chapter, Kildare was a dual monastery, however this situation was not unique to Kildare within Ireland. It can be seen in numerous hagiographic descriptions of monasteries throughout western Christendom, such as that in the *vita* of Saint

Salaberg. It is claimed that she established a female monastery with six churches; additionally, she built with it a small male monastery with its own small church (Schulenburg 1988: 110).⁶ Of course, it cannot be taken for granted that this literary description of the political structure of the joint monastery was a reflection of the reality of the situation. Men dominated most of positions of power in Europe at this time, and it is difficult to believe that there were many men willing to live under the religious authority of a woman. Even if a woman did retain control of a joint monastery, it seems highly likely that she would have shared some of her authority, indeed, we find such an example in the case of Brigit who shared episcopal control with Conláed. Either way, however, abbesses and foundresses played an important role in the development of the cult of saints, both as providing an outlet for traditions of female saints to thrive and be venerated, and as saints themselves.

It was in the Middle Ages that the *Cultus Sanctus* increased in its importance and moved into a central role within the church (Geary 1996: 2). In the early Middle Ages, saints were created as a product of popularity rather than by any formal method of election such as those developed in the later Middle Ages (Schulenburg 1988: 103). Perhaps the most remarkable development was that while asceticism and missionary work were still important in the lives of saints, more saints were coming from positions of power and prestige. Schulenburg argues that as the Middle Ages progressed, many of these figures were judged principally for their public lives; many were married and most were not from an impoverished background (1988: 105). Slowly, the social position that the saint occupied moved up the social ladder; by the tenth century queens and nobles who had not been martyred were acceptable as saints

⁶ For descriptions of these saints and their monasteries see op cit.

and by the eleventh century a king could be viewed as a crowned monk and thereby become a saint (Nelson 1973: 41). This contributed to a relative decline in the number of female saints. In her survey of saints in Italy, France, Britain, Germany, and Belgium, Schulenburg documents two thousand two hundred and six saints in the *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* dating from the sixth to the eleventh centuries (1998: 64). Of these three hundred and twenty four (14.7%) are women, with the numbers vacillating considerably in the different regions: in Britain over a quarter (27.6%) of the two hundred thirty two saints were women, while in Italy only seven point two percent of the four hundred and forty saints were women (Schulenburg 1998: 64)

We have seen so far that the cult of saints rose due to a combination of local popularity and the possibility of political and economic gain by the elite in the church. What had begun as simple local veneration for those who possessed the faith to the point of dying, had become a widespread cult practice. It survived through the ages because of its local appeal, its easy portability in the form of relics, and reforms, which helped to make the cult more accessible to ordinary people while giving the church greater control of the cult and its associated wealth and popularity. One aspect, not discussed so far, is the *vitae*, which made the saints familiar heroes and allowed for the saints to become more than just abstractions. This cult eventually formed the cornerstone of medieval Christianity, and still survives in varying forms today.

Chapter 2

Hagiography and Biography

The *Cultus Sanctus* has provided modern scholars with a rich body of materials that help us to understand the Medieval church. This extensive and varied corpus of materials includes such works as liturgical calendars, miracles, liturgies, and accounts of the celebration of the saint's day (Geary 1996: 3). However, the core texts of the *Cultus Sanctus* are the actual *vitae* or biographical accounts of the lives of the saints. This tradition of writing the lives of saints has its roots in the earliest days of Christianity. Before the writing of complete biographical lives, written sources were circulated about the deaths of some of the martyrs. The earliest surviving martyrology is *The Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp* († 155), which was written shortly after his death. Polycarp himself was a bishop of Smyrna, modern day Izmir, in Turkey (85-90AD) (Noble and Head 1995: xx). It is likely that Polycarp was also one of the earliest figures to move beyond simple martyrdom into the realm of sainthood. Noble and Head document this development into a saint and show that he is the earliest known martyr to be celebrated with a shrine, a feast day, and a cult that encouraged emulation of his life as well as revering his death (1995: xx). Over time, more events from the actual lives of the martyrs from before they were killed were used to compose the story of their martyrdom. This became especially true after the end of the persecutions when the saints were drawn from people who did not die for their faith but rather were elected for their deeds during their lifetime.

To begin with an extremely broad definition of the purpose of saints lives, we could use Heffernan's definition that 'the primary social function of sacred biography ... is to teach (*docere*) the truth of the faith through the principle of individual example'(Heffernan 1988: 19). While this may be an acceptable, albeit broad, definition, to both modern scholars and ancient or medieval hagiographers, the writing of the lives very often took on more complex dimensions. These dimensions require more explanation than the above definition provides. Factors such as politics, personal views, and wealth all played a factor in the writing and development of the *vitae*.

Although it is a broad sweep at an understanding of hagiography that is being attempted here, we must remember that the *vitae* reflect a wide range of different characters over a vast range of time and space within western Christendom. Yet, there are certain common traits that are shared throughout the wide assortment of the lives. While the general biographical pattern seems to follow the international heroic biography,⁷ and many of the details, such as charitable donations, healing of the sick, and converting the masses are also common motifs throughout the hagiographical texts much of this is due to the fact that the aim of the lives was constant: namely to provide an example of Christian virtue. In order to do this, many aspects of most of the lives imitated either characters from the Bible such as apostles and prophets or they were based on previous saint's *vitae*. Indeed, verbatim copying between the lives was not uncommon (Noble and Head 1995: xvii). Because these biographies were often based more on these common prototypes, the *vitae* tend not to reflect

⁷ The history and development of this idea will be developed more fully in the first chapter on the next section of this thesis.

much of the individuality of the people described. Differences were minimised in the name of a set definition of sanctity. Even the physical descriptions of the saints were often absent in the attempt to emphasise the broad character, personality, and virtues above the individuals who reflect them (Boyer 1980: 29).

The *vitae* began to show greater variation in rhetoric and form at the same time that the writing of the texts in the vernacular came into use in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This change happened much sooner in Ireland, as witnessed in our ninth century text the *Bethu Brigitte*. It is possible that some of the rhetorical traditions that had previously bound the *vitae* were not able to be maintained after the authors shifted from Latin to the local vernacular languages of the West. Heffernan gives a full account of the tremendous change in this period of the Middle Ages; the use of vernacular may be an important reason for the increase in variation in the different characters at this point (1988: 14). In addition, the shift to the vernacular languages may indicate that local traditions were emerging and beginning to affect the biographies of the Christian heroes. Whatever the reason, after this time, the lives began to show great variety and regional variation. This is not to say that certain saints were not particularly influential. In the Latin West, the *vita* of one saint in particular was imitated. This saint was Martin of Tours. The *Vita Martini* or *The Life of Saint Martin of Tours* by Sulpicius Severus was, with the obvious exception of the Bible, one of the most influential texts within the European hagiographical tradition. As for Irish hagiography, Michael Richter has recently shown that the biography by Severus had influenced a number of authors, most famously Adomnán. Indeed, it was important enough that it was written into the *Book of Armagh*, which is the earliest surviving copy of *VM* that we have from Ireland (1999: 225-231). It

would seem that the inclusion of the *VM* in the *Book of Armagh* was intended to indicate that Patrick was on a par with such an important figure in the early church (Richter 1999: 230). Because of his impact on both continental and Irish hagiography, it is worth discussing both the men behind the *vita*, namely Martin and Sulpicius Severus, as well as the *vita* itself.

Saint Martin himself was popularly regarded as a saint within his lifetime. He was also known as the apostle of Gaul or as the thirteenth apostle. He was an ascetic, a missionary with noted success in the conversion of pagans, a bishop, and was known for the performance of numerous miracles (Wilson 1983: 3). Martin was not always active in the church nor did he establish asceticism as a monastic practice in the west. It was not until after he left the Roman army in 356 that he went to Poitiers where he joined Bishop Hilary, a proponent of the Nicene Creed. After a period of study and journeying, he finally established himself as an ascetic just outside of Tours, however, once there, he was not to live the solitary life that he desired. People flocked to join him, eventually leading to the foundation of a monastery. He was elected bishop of Tours c. 371, a position that he accepted even while retaining an ascetic lifestyle. He also established a monastery at Marmoutier, and held both the positions of Abbot of Marmoutier and Bishop of Tours until his death in 397 (Stancliffe 1983: 1).

According to Severus, Martin was widely regarded as a saint during his life, and he describes him as such in his work. Because of this popular veneration, people insisted that he become bishop of Tours. This is in spite of other bishops' attempts to publicly humiliate Martin (*VM* §9). In addition to his worldly prestige, people began to tell tales of the miraculous nature of Martin. Sulpicius Severus heard these tales

and began to collect them into a *vita* (Van Dam 1993: 13). Obviously the *vita* of the saint then could not be concerned with Martin's death; this makes the *VM* the first *vita* that focused exclusively on the life of the saint. The reasons why Severus wrote the *vita* can never be fully known. It is probable that Severus wanted to gain good standing with Martin, and through this good standing, to gain additional good standing with God (Stancliffe 1983: 76).

However, there probably were more worldly causes for the writing of the text that are closely bound with the question of audience. The *vita* is dedicated to Desiderius, who was a well-known ascetic himself, and Severus hopes that it will give pleasure to '*Omnibus Sanctis*' (*VM* Dedication). Stancliffe argues that it therefore seems likely that the intended audience of the text would have been ascetic converts, especially in Gaul (1983: 72). However, Severus certainly would have been aware that others outside this small community also would read this text. It should be remembered that both asceticism and Martin were not universally popular in Gaul at this period. Martin, although gaining widespread popularity amongst the general population, was not very popular with the clerics and bishops in Gaul at the time. Indeed, many of them objected to Martin being elected bishop of Tours due to his unkempt appearance and ascetic lifestyle (Van Dam 1993: 14, *VM* §9). In light of this, Severus would have realised that it was necessary in the *vita* to both defend Martin and his ascetic practices (Stancliffe 1983: 73).

Sulpicius Severus divided the work into four parts. It begins with a dedicatory letter and preface, which establishes the scope and aims of the work. It is worth noting that in this section, Severus attacks the usual purpose of writing a biography; the achievement of eternal fame. Stancliffe gives a detailed analysis of

how by subverting the arguments of Sallust in his *Catilinae Conjunctio*, Severus changes the quest for eternal fame into a quest for eternal salvation (1983: 73-74). It then gives a chronological description of Martin's life, consisting of his birth, his election as bishop of Tours, and his foundation of the monastery at Marmoutier (§§2-10). The third section, which describes Martin's miracles, is divided into four subsections. It begins with Martin successfully fighting against the pagan religion (§§11-15), then describes various cures and exorcisms performed by Martin (§§16-19). §20 describes Martin's relationship with Emperor Maximus, while the final anecdotes illuminate Martin's miraculous nature (§§21-24). The *vita* ends with a final main section that is concerned with Martin's interior life and asceticism (§§25-27). However, it is worth noting that the text itself is continuous, and these divisions are not clearly demarcated in the text, it is scholars such as Stancliffe who have recognised this organisational layout (1983: 86-87).

Although this format is not the only layout used, it has been enormously influential on hagiography in general. For example, Sharpe points out that Adomnán loosely copied this format in the *Life of Saint Columba* (1995: 57). Often authors found it necessary to adapt this format as well, for instance to include a death tale or to shift the centre of attention to a foundation rather than a personality. Indeed, it would seem that Cogitosus also used a four-fold format in his biography of Saint Brigit. He begins with an introduction, followed by a brief description of her life, followed by posthumous miracles and concludes with a glorified description of Kildare. While the sections do not exactly correlate to Saint Martin's *vita*, it would seem likely that the use of a four fold biographical structure would easily have been borrowed by Cogitosus.

Of course, it was not only the general outline of the *vita* by Sulpicius Severus that had a large impact on western hagiography. Stancliffe argues that because it was the first written *vita* that was concerned with the life, rather than the death, of its protagonist, Severus's work established many of the miracles and aspects of a person's life that were used to define sanctity in the Middle Ages. While many of the miracles had biblical influences, or one might say inspirations, it was the *VM* that first applied them to a figure from outside the Bible and adapted them to the needs of people in a certain place and time. Independent of the Gospels, Severus seems not to have had any previous Christian biographical sources to use that could have informed his source. Therefore, despite the fact that he had remained highly critical of secular biographies, such as the *Life of Agricola* by Tacitus, and their emphasis on worldly glory, he made extensive use of them as inspiration for his own hagiographical work. However much these classical sources may have influenced Severus, the aim of the *vita* was undoubtedly Christian (Stancliffe 1983: 89-90). Stancliffe makes a claim that the main aim of classical biography was to magnify the person in the hope of achieving worldly fame. However, in a Christian context of salvation after death, this worldliness was unacceptable. Severus changed this notion with his aim now being to win salvation through the saint he was praising (Stancliffe 1983: 76-87).

It is also worth noting that the ideas of sanctity and holiness reflected in the *vitae* may not reflect the values of the society at large. While the behaviour demonstrated by the saints was an ideal to be imitated, both the authors and the saints tended to come from either clerical or noble classes; piety was shown as an idealised and selfless quest for purity and reverence before God. Noble and Head point out that wherever the set of values may have come from, the model of extreme piety

displayed was certainly unattainable for people of any class (1995: xviii). Of course, even in the texts some sort of worldly benefit was often expected in return for, and as demonstration of, the piety demonstrated (Weinstein and Bell 1982: 10). These texts were themselves highly stratified in terms of the social classes that produced the holy and chosen few. In other words, the saints were often from the wealthy classes. As a result of this weighting in favour of social status, we cannot assume that the hagiographical texts reflected the lifestyle of the general population. Indeed, despite this class based derivation, the continued popularity of the figure of the saint may well have been the products of the mass of popular society as a whole. This is made more complex when it is realised that designations in the medieval social class structure were extraordinarily complex. There was often favouritism, especially in the early Middle Ages, shown towards the more elite classes by the hagiographers (Weinstein and Bell 1982: 9).

Of course, it must be said that not every *vita* was just a simple reproduction of the others. If this were the case, there might not have been much of a need for more than a handful of individual *vitae* as well as saints to accompany them in different local areas. In other words, if the *vitae* were all the same, we would not need nearly as many texts or saints as we currently have. Fortunately, within these templates, there was a unique dynamism and change as the numerous different saints rose to the demands of their faith, time, and location. While this struggle may have happened within strict guidelines, the result was that there was uniqueness to each individual character (Boyer 1980: 33). This was further complicated by the fact that saints were often used as metaphors of both secular and clerical politics. To use Heffernan's example, the image of Edward the Confessor healing a leper reflects both the

behaviour of Christ as well as reflecting a show of mercy to the Saxons after the battle of Hastings (*Life of King Edward* p.61-64, Heffernan 1988: 5-6). In order to capture the political reality of the time, different images had to be used. It was the ability of the genre to absorb complex ideologies, with a minimum amount of ambiguity and argument, into a set form that help them to gain a special place in medieval literature (Heffernan 1988: 6).

Hagiography, in addition to being one of the most popular forms of medieval literature, was also one of the most copiously represented. Heffernan points out that the *Bibliotheca Hagiographica* lists over eight thousand *vitae*. While only a fraction of these lives survived the Reformation, there is still a large enough corpus to make categorising the lives difficult, as there are almost inevitably exceptions to any categories created (Heffernan 1988: 13-14). Noble and Head describe three broad categories of hagiographical literature. First is the type where the life and miracles of the saint are described. The second category is posthumous miracles performed at the tomb of the saint. Finally, there were histories of the relics left by the saint. The first was often to provide an exemplar of the holy life. The last two were to show the sanctity of the saint, and were often used to advertise holy sites for a number of different purposes, such as burial rights, pilgrims, and adherents to the monastic life (Noble and Head 1995: xvii). Of course, all of the *vitae* must have reflected the needs and interests of the monastery or church represented by the saint. It was also possible to mix these broad categories as witnessed by our own *Vita II* by Cogitosus, which although is mainly concerned with promoting the ambitions of Kildare through discussion of relics and posthumous miracles, also provides lists a number of miracles believed to have been performed by Brigit during her lifetime.

Delehayé completed a more detailed categorisation of the literature; he describes six forms of *vitae*.⁸ First there are genuine martyrologies, which were simple factual accounts of the events, specifically the death of the saint, described with minimal elaboration. The next category also consists of genuine martyrologies, but they are more complex and more apologetic, often with greater commentary and elaboration. These accounts also tend to contain eyewitness accounts of the event. The third category is a development from the first two categories, but also includes a few accounts of the saint which appear to be legendary, or at least hear say, rather than actual historical events. The fourth category is very similar to the previous category, but lacks an earlier written account on which to base the more elaborate *vita*. As a result, much of the material we find within these texts probably belongs more to legend than to history. The penultimate category contains those in which nearly everything is non-historical, with most of their materials being either legendary or invented. This could even include saints who never actually lived, but were invented as non-historical figures. The final category is those *vitae* that are forgeries, and clearly do not document figures that were historical or believed to be historical. These forgeries may have been the work of charlatans trying to make money or more likely just indicated decay in the genre as it completed the transition from history to folklore. Delehayé points out that this last category is extremely difficult to identify. These texts are still meant to seem, often very effectively, like legitimate saint's biographies (1998: 92). Unfortunately, we cannot know into which of these categories the *vitae* of our Saint Brigit would have fallen. We can be fairly certain, given the mythological and otherworldly nature of her *vitae* that these texts

⁸ What follows is a summary of Delehayé (1998: 89-92).

did not fall into Delehayé's first or second category. However, the fact that there was a real and powerful cult behind the figure would indicate that the texts would not fit into Delehayé's final category. However, attempting to figure out which of the third, fourth or fifth category Brigit's *vitae* would belong to would seem to amount to little more than guess work.

Finally, throughout all these sub-genres we find that *vitae* themselves are then divided into different parts of the heroic biography. Different scholars have created different divisions. For simplicity sake, I will use that given by Boyer while we are discussing the broad tradition (1980: 32). It is worth noting that this is not identical to the ones that Bray has identified for use in analysis of the Irish *vitae* (1986). The complexities of the Irish *vitae* will be discussed in specific relation to Brigit in a later chapter. Again, the *vitae* can contain all, one, or some of these categories. The *vitae* often begin with the saint's origins and family; the saint is usually from a noble line. The birth of the saint is usually miraculous and accompanied by signs and portents of his future greatness. Examples of this include dreams revealed to a parent or close family member, such as the dog bearing a torch revealed to Dominic de Guzmán's mother (*Acta SS* I 04/08: 359-654), or an easy birth, as with the birth of Queen Cunegund of Poland (*Acta SS* V 07/24: 661-783). At this point the life takes one of two avenues. Either the saint is a wonderful child, with abnormal charity, morality, courage, meekness or wisdom for a child, or the saint is a terrible child who is converted later in life as a result of a determining event (Boyer 1980: 33). This event is often marked by the death of a parent, usually a father. This should not be taken as a simple cause and effect; circumstances can differ and the reason for the conversion may be the result of change of circumstances as well as for the emotional trauma.

For example, Thomas Helia became pious because he was sent to live with the bishop of Constance after the death of his parents (*Acta SS VIII* 19/10: 592-622). A more emotional attachment can be seen in the life of Angela Merici, founder of the Ursulines, who began to receive visions after the death of her parents (*BSS* 1: 1191-1195).⁹

Weinstein and Bell give a clear description of the childhood of saints. Children who were pious from birth also show variety in their *vitae*. Many were graceful and perfect at birth, but a good number were guilt ridden penitents who attempted to abandon their bodies by starving themselves and torturing their flesh. Indeed, the guilt can still be seen in their constant rivers of tears of guilt. Waddems sees an example of this in the life of Thomas Becket, who was discovered after his death to have worn a hair-shirt under his vestments (Waddems 1969: 24). It is worth noting that this type of behaviour is seen more commonly in girls than in boys; even when self-flagellation was not performed, it was usually girls who suffered from a guilt ridden childhood. There are other differences between the childhood of boys and girls. Notably, for the boys it was usually a path chosen early in life with the encouragement of their parents or guardians. For girls it was usually a choice thrust upon them by their parents, although there are often exceptions to each of these, including Brigit, who became a nun against her family's wishes. Miracles performed at this age were more likely to deal with the saint's immediate environment than with anything else. Weinstein and Bell claim that the medieval notion of childhood was probably not that different from ours today. In other words, it was perceived as being a frivolous time filled with mischief and fun. It is this sort of behaviour that is often

⁹ These particular references are pointed out in Weinstein and Bell (1982: 23).

used as a backdrop to contrast against the holy behaviour of the fledgling saint (Weinstein and Bell 1982: 19-48).

Either during or after childhood, the saints receive their education (Boyer 1980: 32). In either case they usually showed a talent for learning, especially boys who were generally serious about their studies, but charismatic and liked by both students and teachers. Girls were expected to display austerity, obedience, and humility as well as displaying a talent for prayer (Weinstein and Bell 1982: 23). After this, the piety of the saint is discussed in great detail, although it is common for this aspect of the saint to be diffused throughout the *vita*. While there were many virtues that were displayed in the *vitae*, the most important was chastity. It was chastity that made clear the division between the world of the spirit from the world of the flesh. Even married saints, who were usually men, such as Edward the Confessor, tended to insist on celibate marriages (*Life of King Edward* f. 141-142). Although men were often the driving force behind celibacy within a marriage, it could also sometimes be a woman. Bede gives an excellent example of this with Etheldreda, who was offered riches and wealth if she would consummate her marriage with Egfrid. Eventually her request to take the veil was granted (*HE* IV.19). If a saint had children, such as with Saint Birgitta of Sweden, it was made clear that the saint only coupled out of necessity, and certainly not out of lust, nor out of any desire other than to procreate (Morris 1999: 44). Beauty, for female saints, was a mark of divine election. However, the beauty was disregarded, indeed, even detested, by these saint because their looks, in addition to being a mark of holiness was also highly effective at attracting men's sexual advances. As a result this gift had a somewhat ambiguous nature (Weinstein and Bell 1982: 27).

The final part of the life is the martyrdom, which is usually given in great detail (Boyer 1980: 32). Even if the saint had not been killed for his faith, there is usually a detailed description of the death of the saint, which is accompanied by or followed by supernatural events. This was the ultimate moment in the life of a saint. As mentioned above, it was the moment of their ascension into heaven and the end of their worldly suffering. It represented either the conclusion of a lifetime of work, or their ultimate witness to the martyrdom of Christ. Next, there is the *inventio*, in which miracles associated with the saint's relic and body are listed. This is then followed by the *translatio*, which describes the moving of the relics into a church or monastery. This usually is accompanied by a detailed description of the shrine and relics, which may have acted as a sort of advertisement to pilgrims (Boyer 1980: 32-33). These divisions can vary within the categories of saint, and are often not very clearly demarcated. The part of the life that was emphasised often depended on how the saints gained their canonisation; there is likely to be great emphasis on the death of a martyr, the poverty of an ascetic, the teaching and writings of a confessor, or the purity of a virgin (Boyer 1980: 33).

The *Cultus Sanctus*, which began as veneration for those who had died for their faith, adapted itself to a post-persecution form of Christianity and spread throughout Europe, surviving well into the Middle Ages and into the Modern Age. It was able to do this because of its portability and accessibility in the form of relics and the use of tales to help popularise the saints. With the spread of the cult of the saints, certain saints became better known throughout Christendom than others. Their lives became templates upon which numerous other saint's biographers based their works. We have seen that one particularly important saint who became known through the

wider church was Saint Martin of Tours, whose *vita* by Sulpicius Severus became one of the most influential texts in hagiography. In addition, the Bible and other saints *vitae* helped to shape hagiography and make it an enormously popular form of writing in the Middle Ages. As in the rest of Europe, the cult of saints was adapted in Ireland to suit local purposes. It is that area that we will examine next.

Chapter 3

The Early Missionaries in Ireland

One of the more obvious places to begin any discussion on the early church in Ireland is with the missions of Patrick and Palladius. Patrick himself has attracted much popular attention that continues today in the modern world. Indeed, March 17th is celebrated in his honour in cities throughout the world. On the other hand, Palladius, another key figure in the Christianisation of fifth century Ireland, has faded into relative obscurity. Both of these figures may have played an important role in the early development of the church and date shortly before the period when Brigit was supposed to have lived. Behind Patrick's popularity was a politically powerful monastic federation, which is in turn backed by two surviving works from Patrick's own hand. The medieval Irish did not see Palladius, who was only remembered in Ireland in a few scattered remarks, as nearly as important of a figure as Patrick. One possibility for Palladius's relative obscurity was that the Patrician authors did not realise the importance of Palladius, who has only been mentioned in a few continental sources. On the other hand, the coarbs of Patrick, who obviously would not have wanted a competitor for their patron saint, may have sought to diminish the public perception of the efforts of Palladius (Charles-Edwards 2000: 212-13). In addition to Palladius other saints were claimed to have been in Ireland before the coming of Patrick, but these seem to be claims made during the twelfth century, and not representative of actual history (Bieler 1968: 114). In either case, no saint would ever be able to claim the level of popularity that Patrick was to achieve.

Fifth century Ireland had no recognisable towns or cities in either the medieval or modern sense. Liam De Paor describes the physical and human geography of early Ireland. With a population estimated to be between one half and one fifth of a million, Ireland was a contrast to the urban landscape that shaped the church within the Roman Empire. Dense bogs and forests dominated the landscape of early Ireland. Rivers and lake valleys conspired with wet lowlands to make a watery landscape that only allowed for scattered settlements and localised government (De Paor 1993: 23). While we cannot know the avenues by which Christianity entered Ireland, we can be certain that there were Christians in Ireland by the time Palladius was sent to Ireland. Although the church sent bishops to communities that sometimes number as little as twelve Christians, bishops were, nevertheless, only sent to existing Christian communities that were willing to have a bishop (Dumville 1984: 17, Charles-Edwards 2000: 205). Additionally, as we shall see, when Prosper records Palladius's mission, it is recorded that he was being sent to the 'Irish believing in Christ', in other words the mission was not an attempt at converting the Irish (*Chronicon* in *PL* 51).

How Christianity first established itself in Ireland was something of a mystery, and probably the result of a combination of factors. Irish raids on Britain were recorded as early as 297, with the main period of activity occurring from 350 to 440 (De Búrca 1965: 282). In addition to seizing booty, the raiders would have taken people from these areas to be slaves. De Búrca points out that at least a few of these slaves would have been Christian and would have begun to introduce and spread Christian terminology and information about the Christian faith, if not the faith itself (1965: 282-83). Indeed, De Búrca and Binchy point out that there are numerous loan

words that, from their forms and mutations, can be dated from the fourth century or earlier, many of which may well have been carried over by slaves (De Búrca 1965: 282, Binchy 1962: 166). Saint Patrick himself falls into the category of Christian slave (*Conf.* §10). Additionally, the Irish had colonised areas of Western Britain, such as in Dyfed. Morris rightly argues that many of these colonists were likely to have embraced the new faith, and may have begun to convert their kinsmen, especially those who were in their care as fosterlings who would have brought the faith back to Ireland (Morris 1978: 5). It is of course, easy to imagine how other individuals might have come to the new faith. For instance, Ireland almost certainly had trade contacts with the Roman Empire both on the Continent and Britain, which could have exposed individuals such as merchants or sailors to Christianity (De Paor 1993: 24). Indeed, McManus has pointed out that many of the earliest Latin loan words into Irish seem to come from commerce, examples include terms such as *cann* from Latin *panna* (vessel), and *cess* from Latin *cista* (basket). However, not all words were associated with commerce. McManus points out that there was a number of Latin words, associated with the new faith, that seem to have arrived before Palladius, such as *pairche* from Latin *paroecia* (parish) and *peccath* from Latin *peccatum* (sin). This would indicate a Christian population before the bishop arrived in Ireland (McManus 1983: 39).

Unfortunately, Palladius and his mission have been mostly forgotten about over time, although Ó Cróinín has recently argued that parts of Palladius's life before he came to Ireland have been preserved in the writings of one Rutilius Namatianus

(2000: 237).¹⁰ It is probable that his mission was a response to the Pelagian heresy. Pelagius himself was a Briton who held a radical doctrine of free will that included the possibility, however slim, of salvation without baptism (Nicholson 1995: 386-390). Pelagius and his followers were, after many debates with St. Augustine, Jerome, and other leaders of the church, condemned by Pope Innocent I in 417 and Pelagianism was declared heretical by Pope Zosimus in 418 (Nicholson 1995: 391-92). Nicholson points out that in spite of this, many of the Pelagians found a home in Britain, over which Rome had renounced its authority in 410. Nicholson even entertains the possibility that Pelagius may have even ended up in Britain, the land of his birth, after he had been declared a heretic (Nicholson 1995: 392-93). Celestine saw Pelagianism as a threat to the authority of the church and was eager to eliminate Pelagianism and bring Britain in line with the mainstream doctrine of the church (Chadwick 1960: 18). Because of this, in 429 Celestine, on the advice of Palladius, sent Germanus of Auxerre to eliminate the heresy in Britain. It is not clear if this mission was successful or not, but in 431, according to Prosper, Celestine sent Palladius '*ad Scottos in Christum credentes*' (PL 51.595), Ó Cróinín has recently pointed out that there is no reason to doubt that Prosper's report on this matter was nothing but accurate (2000: 208). The exact meaning of *Scottos* in this context is not clear. While it literally means Irish, it is not clear if the word is meant to mean the race, wherever they may have lived, or the people living on the island independent of place of origin. It is possible that at least some of the believers were of British descent, probably slaves and freed slaves who were still living in Ireland who had brought the Pelagian heresy with them. This being the case, Bieler points out that

¹⁰ For more information see Ó Cróinín (2000: 205-237).

one aspect of the Palladian mission may have been to stamp out the Pelagian heresy in Ireland (1968: 114). Even if these people were not British but of Irish descent, they probably received their Christianity from Britain due to geographical proximity and trade links. If this was the case, they may have imported the heresy along with the faith. It is worth noting that Prosper himself was a zealous opponent of the Pelagian heresy and would have been an advocate of such a mission (Chadwick 1960: 16). Indeed, there are numerous examples within his writings of Prosper's opposition to the heresy:

The Pelagian heresy and the doctrine by which it began its destructive attack on the Catholic faith and endeavoured to poison with ungodly tenets the inner life of the church and the very vitals of the Body of Christ are too well known to need relating.

(*Letter to Rufinus* §1)

The mission was certainly of great importance to Celestine. Palladius was his personal deacon and no small figure in the church at that time. It was also the first time that a bishop had been sent beyond the widest frontiers that the former Roman Empire had once reached (Morris 1978: 4-5). One exception to this was Ulfila, who was sent by Eusebius to be bishop among the Goths in the fourth century (Heather and Matthews 1991: 133-54). However, by this point they had invaded and settled in areas that had belonged to Rome. Sending such a high profile figure to a barbarian area was obviously more than just the standard practice of sending bishops to existing communities. Thompson argues that the Roman authorities generally had little interest in converting the barbarians outside of the fringes of the empire, or at least the former empire (1985: 64-65). We are not sure what the aims or consequences of the Palladian mission might have been. As we shall see, the Irish texts did not record Palladius as being a great success, but this may have been a

consequence of Armagh's attempts at self-aggrandisement. For example, *The Tripartite Life of Saint Patrick* claims that after founding three churches in Leinster, and baptising a few people, Palladius died in Pictland (*The Tripartite Life of Saint Patrick* 30.11-24).

At the time of the mission itself, Palladius may have been seen as being a success. In the mid-430s Prosper, presumably remarking on Palladius, wrote that 'et ordinato Scotis episcopo [scilicet Palladio], dum Romanam insulam studet servare catholicam fecit etiam barbaram Christianam' (*PL* 51. 271).¹¹ Given that Palladius would have been in Ireland for only a few years at this point, even if he were actively trying to convert the Irish, it seems most unlikely that he could literally have converted the entire island. This would imply that the better part of Ireland's population were still practising pagans. Unfortunately, we do not know what became of Palladius; he does not receive mention in any record again. In his absence, Leo, later Pope Leo the Great, replaced Palladius as Celestine's papal deacon (Morris 1985: 5). Unfortunately, aside from these few references, we do not have any other sources for the mission, so we cannot know what happened or how the mission concluded. While Irish sources vary as to how Palladius failed in his mission, they all agree that he was a failure. Muirchú records that Patrick was on his way to Ireland when he received news of the death of Palladius. As a result, according to Muirchú at any rate, Patrick went to Amatorex to be ordained as a bishop (Muirchú I 9(8)). However, this would actually seem to be highly unlikely, since Amator died in

¹¹ By appointing a bishop to the Irish [that is Palladius], while he toiled to keep the Roman Island (Britain) Catholic, he also made the barbarian island Christian.

418; whatever the case may be, by 435, Prosper implied that Palladius had died (Morris 1978:5).

On the subject of Patrick, we can comfortably say more. Of course, this also means that there is more room for confusion, and, as Hanson points out, it seems that every possible theory on Patrick has been put forth (1995: 23). This is not the place to cover all those theories in detail, but Patrick must be mentioned in any survey of Irish hagiography, especially in light of the important role that he plays in the Brigidine texts. It is important to note that he may not have been seen as being a very important figure during his own time. This is witnessed by that fact that he is not mentioned by any contemporary authors in the fifth century. Even later, Bede failed to make any mention of the apostle of the Irish. It is only later that we have numerous mentions of Saint Patrick. This is not to say that the only materials that we have date from the seventh century and later. We have at least two surviving works written by the historical figure behind the folklore: the *Confessio* and the *Epistola*, plus a number of possible fragments of his writing in the Book of Armagh.¹²

As Hood points out, the writings reveal that Patrick was probably not a well-educated bishop as the quality of his Latin shows many errors and unusual use of grammar (1978: 18).¹³ In spite of this, his claims of ignorance and poor learning were also a common rhetorical convention and may not constitute a sincere claim (Chadwick 1960: 25). In other words, his claiming to be unlearned, while it may be true, does not necessarily mean that he thought he was unlearned. However, he was

¹² All of Patrick's writings, along with Muirchú's *Vita*, are edited and translated by Alan Hood (1978: *Saint Patrick: His Writings and Muirchú's Life*). For our purposes, we will be using Hood's translations for the writings of Saint Patrick himself, but for the Patrician *Vitae*, we will be using Bieler's edition (1979: *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*).

able to overcome significant opposition to his mission, indicating that, in spite of a possible shortage of formal learning, he must have been politically skilled enough to have had some influential friends (Hanson 1995: 32). The *Confessio* is a description and defence of the work that Patrick has done in Ireland, and is very useful in attempting to come to grips with the historical figure of Patrick as he gives a brief auto-biography in the text. The *Epistola* is a text that attacks and excommunicates the soldiers of a tyrant called Coroticus who had taken some recently baptised Irish as slaves.¹⁴ As Patrick is attempting to bring public action against Coroticus we can assume that the *Epistola* is intended for a public audience (Dumville 1993: 118). In addition to these writings, we have the *vita* by Muirchú and the *Collectanea* by Tírechán, which are of limited use in trying to understand the historical Patrick as they are written about two centuries after the events that they describe.

Unfortunately, Patrick did not see fit to include any dates in his writings. There is a remarkable amount of agreement in the native literature and annals that Patrick arrived as a missionary in 432. Dumville points out that numerous modern scholars have freely used this date (1993: 39). However, this date should not automatically be taken strictly at face value, indeed, the only thing that we can be sure of regarding this date is that it reflects continuity in the tradition (Dumville 1993: 39). That date may not even have been originally associated with Patrick; it is

¹³ For an alternative view see Howlett (1994: 11-13). Until Howlett's methodologies are more rigorously tested, I will refrain from using them too heavily in my arguments.

¹⁴ According to Dumville, Coroticus may have been a British Christian himself. Regarding Coroticus's religion, Dumville rightly points out that Patrick attempts to excommunicate him, an empty threat if he were not a Christian (1993: 107). However, regarding nationality, while Coroticus seems to have been British, Dumville argues that if he were not living in Ireland, Patrick would have been operating outside of his area (1993: 107-09). It seems to me that this ignores the fact that the audience that Patrick would have been trying to reach was obviously familiar with Latin, and therefore probably not Irish. Additionally, Patrick was a British bishop and may have felt that a person from



possible that it was linked to Palladius who would have been active in Ireland during 432 (O' Rahilly 1942: 11-13). Nora Chadwick has made a still convincing claim that even though we do not have an exact date, Patrick probably dated from the fifth century (1960: 21). His writing is free from Hisperic characteristics, and he uses a text of the Scriptures that combines the Vulgate with the *Vetus Latina*,¹⁵ all of which would tend to favour a date in the mid-fifth century. Furthermore, both his father and grandfather were members of the clergy and they were married. This practice is in keeping with fourth and fifth century ecclesiastical practice (Chadwick 1960: 21).

It is likely that the *Epistola* was written before or soon after 496. As Dumville points out, Patrick refers to the Franks as heathens, so it was likely to have been written before the Frankish kings converted in 496, or at least before Patrick learned about it (Dumville 1993: 14). As for earlier limits, in *EpC*. §14, Patrick mentions the coin known as a *solidus*, which was first minted by Constantine the Great (†337). This fact, like Patrick's Rule of Faith with its signs of the Arian controversy, shows that Patrick could not have flourished earlier than the mid-fourth century. He certainly does not have any problem communicating with Britain and even contemplates visiting Gaul in the *Confessio* but declines to do so, because he feels that to do so would betray the orders given to him by God (*Conf.* §15). Thus the widest possible range of time for Patrick to have operated was between the mid-fourth to the end of the fifth century. Within this time range, the most likely time for Patrick's work would have been in the early to mid fifth century as the *solidus* was

Britain was within his jurisdiction. An even more likely explanation is that even if Britain was not in his jurisdiction, the sin was clearly committed in Ireland, which was within Patrick's jurisdiction.

¹⁵ For more detail on the bible text used by Patrick see Bieler (1947).

still being minted, and was in circulation for some time after its first press, but no fixed date can be assured (Dumville 1993: 13-19).

Glimpses of the remainder of the life of Patrick are documented in his *Confessio*. As mentioned, Patrick was the son of a deacon and the grandson of a priest. Despite his seemingly religious family, it seems likely that Patrick did not regard himself as having been a particularly religious child, as he states in *Conf.* §1: 'Deum enim verum ignorabam'.¹⁶ While such claims to religious ignorance are often a literary construct, Patrick's ignorance of God in spite of being raised by members of the clergy may be the result of a law that allowed members of the clergy to be exempt from having to sit on the town councils. As a result, many Roman nobles joined the clergy to avoid the financial obligations that the seat held. It is quite likely that Patrick's father and grandfather were clergy not for religious reasons, but to avoid these taxes (Thompson 1985: 8). However, it must be pointed out that we cannot be sure if Patrick's father was on the *ordo*. It was only after being taken as a slave at the age of 16 that he turned to that 'true' God (*Conf.* §2). Patrick reports that he was taken into slavery with thousands of other Britons. Thompson argues that this large number is highly unlikely (1985: 4-6), however, it may be possible that Patrick was talking of the sum total of those taken into servitude rather than the number taken at the raid during which he was enslaved.

After six years as a slave Patrick heard a voice telling him to return home. This voice also gave him some preliminary instructions on how to achieve this task. He left his captivity, and eventually found a ship that was willing to take him as a passenger (*Conf.* §17). After a dangerous journey that lasted for a long time but

which was aided by the grace of God, Patrick returned home, much to the joy of his parents (*Conf.* §§18-23). This joy was not to last however, as one night in a dream, he was visited by a man called Victoricus, who was described as an angel in the later Irish texts, who brought with him a letter entitled ‘Vox Hiberionacum’ (*Conf.* §23).¹⁷ The name, Victoricus, is the same name as the person who carried letters from St. Paulinus of Nola to Sulpicius Severus of Aquitaine, which included letters inviting Severus to Italy (Chadwick 1960: 27). However, it is also worth repeating Thompson’s argument that the dreams of Patrick were often vivid, but less clear about their purpose than one might expect if he was simply creating them to promote his own agenda (1985: 50). In this letter the Irish people were asking Patrick to return to Ireland in order to evangelise them (*Conf.* §23). After an unspecified period of time, he returned to the land of his captivity. In Ireland he faced many obstacles, and narrowly escaped death twelve times. He attributed these escapes to the grace of God (*Conf.* §37). He also reports that his work has been generally successful to the point of converting thousands (*Conf.* §50). However, Hughes considers these points and concludes that such a large number of converts, even assuming a highly successful mission, was probably an exaggeration (1966: 31). Indeed, thousand of converts do seem to be far more than a single missionary is likely to achieve.

The period between Patrick receiving the call from Victoricus and the time that he actually left for Ireland is something of a mystery. The Middle Irish Patrician *vitae* records that Patrick went to Gaul (*Three Middle Irish Homilies on the Lives of Saints Patrick, Brigit, and Columba*: 15.). This is certainly a possibility; in one of

¹⁶ ‘I did not know the true God’ (Hood 1978:41)

¹⁷ “The Voice of the Irish” (Hood 1978:46)

the surviving fragments from the Book of Armagh that is attributed to Patrick, there is a mention of a visit to the Tyrrhenian Sea and Italy. On the other hand, this connection with Gaul may simply reflect confusion between Patrick and Palladius. Hughes argues that there are considerable grounds for believing that Patrick and Palladius have become confused and blended together in the medieval traditions (1966: 53). Whatever the tradition records, Dumville points out that Patrick seems to regard himself as accountable to the British clergy (1993: 83). Some members of the British clergy were responsible for providing considerable opposition to the proposed mission to Ireland:

Et quando temptatus sum ab aliquantis senioribus meis, qui venerunt et peccata mea contra laboriosum episcopatum meum <obiecerunt>, utique illo die fortiter impulsus sum ut caderem hic et in aeternum.
(*Conf.* §26)¹⁸

The learned Britons at the time regarded themselves as cultured and refined and quite different from the barbarian Irish. Bethell argues that to move outside of the formerly Roman areas would have required a move into a whole different world of mental concepts and societal structure that was regarded as barbaric and inferior (1981: 40). Hanson considers it likely that large amounts of canvassing and politicking, as well as training, would have been needed in order for Patrick to have been made bishop and sent off to Ireland (1995: 27). Indeed, it is probable that it would have been difficult for an unlearned man such as Patrick to convince the other members of the clergy that he was worthy to be a missionary. It may be suggested that a missionary believes that he is able to save souls. Patrick's urge to go to Ireland was prompted by a vision, similar to Paul's vision on the road to Damascus (*Acts* 26:

12-18), which would indicate that he saw himself as called and elected in a similar manner (Bethell 1981: 40). This claim to such high status may well have aroused the ire of at least some clerics in Britain.

It was likely this ire that was the reason for the writing of the *Confessio*. This text sets out to defend Patrick's mission in Ireland. There are two charges, which he seems to be defending himself against. First is an unnamed sin that he committed when he was fifteen. He had confessed this sin to a friend who, thirty years later, used it to attack Patrick and his work:

Occasionem post annos triginta invenerunt me adversus verbum quod confessus fueram antequam essem diaconus. Propter anxietatem maesto animo insinuavi amicissimo meo quae in pueritia mea una die gesseram, immo in uno hora, quia necdum praevelebam. Nescio, Deus scit, si habebam tunc annos quindecim, et Deum vivum non credebam, neque ex infantia mea; sed in morte et in incredulitate mansi donec valde castigatus sum et in veritate humiliatus sum a fame et nuditate, et cotidie.
(*Conf.* §27)¹⁹

Unfortunately, Patrick does not specify what that sin was or who this friend was.

Secondly, Patrick had apparently also been accused of profiting from the mission (*Conf.* §37). It is worth stating that the exact source of funds for Patrick's mission is unknown, although one likely source of income was that Patrick supplied the funds himself, possibly as a result of selling his property in Britain.²⁰ However, at least some of the funds for the mission seem to have been raised within Ireland by

¹⁸ And when I was attacked by a number of my elders, who came and brought up my sins against my arduous episcopate, certainly that day I was struck a heavy blow that I might fall here and for ever. (Hood 1978: 46)

¹⁹ After thirty years they found a pretext for their allegations against me in a confession which I had made before I was a deacon. In a depressed and worried state of mind I mentioned to a close friend what I had done as a boy one day, indeed, in the space of one hour, because I was not yet proof against temptation. I do not know, God knows, whether I was fifteen years old at the time, and I did not believe in the living God, nor had I done since earliest childhood; but I remained in death and unbelief till I was severely chastened and in truth humiliated by hunger and nakedness, and every day too. (Hood 1978: 46); see also *Conf.* (§28-32).

the British bishop himself. Patrick argues that he was not profiting but that there were thankful women who had converted and were leaving riches with him:

tamen conatus sum quippiam servare me etiam et fratribus Christiania et virginibus Christi et mulieribus religiosus, quae mihi ultronea munuscula donabant et super altare iactabant ex ornamentis suis et iterum reddebam illis et adversus me scandalizabantur cur hoc faciebam; sed ego propter spem perennitatis
(*Conf.* §49)²¹

Furthermore, Patrick gave gifts as means of flattering the nobility and also to convince their offspring to travel with him: 'Interim praemia dabam regibus praeter quod dabam mercedem filiis ipsorum qui mecum ambulant' (*Conf.* §52).²² This certainly would have made the mission one that would have used large amounts of resources, which might have added to the charges of profiteering. It is also clear that Patrick had been summoned back to Britain to answer these charges. He was obviously reluctant to do so: 'Unde autem etsi voluero amittere illas et ut pergens in Britanniis – et libentissime paratus eram quasi ad patriam et parentes' (*Conf.* §43).²³ He claims that the reason for this is that God has commanded him to stay in Ireland for the rest of his life (*Conf.* §43). It is possible however, that this reluctance was because he was afraid that he would not be allowed to return to Ireland.

Dumville suggests that this resistance to Patrick's mission, assuming that he followed Palladius, is somewhat surprising. There had been Christians in Ireland at least since 431; there was presumably a need for people who were willing and able to

²⁰ Thompson gives a highly detailed and convincing study of the possible sources for Patrick's mission, and concludes that the most likely source is from the sale of his family property (1985: 106).

²¹ I have done my best to safeguard myself, even in my dealings with Christian brethren and virgins of Christ and with pious women, who would give me unsolicited gifts and throw some of their jewellery on the altar, and I would return it to them, and they would take offence at my doing so: but I did so for the hope of eternity. (Hood 1978: 51); See also *Conf.* (§42).

²² From time to time I gave presents to the kings, quite apart from the payments I made to their sons who travel with me. (Hood 1978: 52).

minister to these early Christians in Ireland. There were probably few clerics in Britain or Rome with any knowledge or experience of Ireland and a willingness to work there. Due to his captivity and spiritual experiences, Patrick would have had all of these requirements. It might have seemed to make sense for someone with a background and experience in Ireland to go there (Dumville 1993: 27). Of course, the opposition may have come from the fact that Patrick had gone, not to minister to an existing community, but with a clearly stated intention of converting the pagan Irish.

With regard to methods of converting people, we do not know what sort of arguments he used in converting people to the faith. All of his surviving works, which are not missionary tracts to begin with, are in Latin and probably would not have been intended for a pre-Christian or newly Christian audience in Ireland most of whom probably would not have been familiar with Latin. However, we can guess at some of the techniques that he may have used. The teachings of Christ would probably have had an enormous appeal to those who are not so well off, such as the unfree classes and women, which represented a significant portion of the society in Ireland. In spite of this, religion is often an expensive business and Christianity is no exception. Christianity is a religion of the book and therefore required vellum for the purposes of writing; it could take as many as four hundred cowhides to provide the vellum for a single copy of the Bible (Bethell 1981: 43). In addition there were other expenses that the new faith required, such as wine, which was needed for the Eucharist, and oil, needed for baptism and other services. All these resources would

²³ And so even if I wanted to part with them and head to Britain – and I would have only been too glad to do so, to see my homeland and family. (Hood 1978: 50)

have been quite expensive in Ireland at that time (Bethell 1981: 43). While it is possible that Patrick may have received funding from Britain, once a church had established itself, it would have needed to produce some sort of income. As we have seen in *Conf.* §52 Patrick admits that he flattered the aristocracy with payments and paid the sons of kings to travel with him. By creating close links with the aristocracy in this manner, Patrick seems to have been able to make significant inroads into Irish culture, a society to which he would have been an outsider. Furthermore, given the survival of the church in Ireland, Patrick, or another early Christian in Ireland, seems to have secured a stable and independent source of income for the church even after he had departed. Unfortunately, we do not know the source or nature of that income. Bethell claims that the church would have also needed land and political support in order to survive. This assistance may have come from newly converted kings, who saw the benefits of establishing a friendly relationship with the church, as well other pious landholders bequeathing property to their new faith (1981: 43-44). Unfortunately, we cannot be sure of this possibility, and it is also possible that the earliest church was funded from elsewhere until it could become independently established.

Hanson argued that Patrick was a Briton who was probably familiar with and who respected Roman institutions and culture (1995: 26). However, Patrick was also certainly aware of the socio-political system in Ireland. Before preaching in any new *tíath*, he would probably would have secured the protection of the king and the goodwill of the nobility. We have seen that he gave gifts to the princes who in return escorted him, and spent lavishly on the brehons of Ireland (*Conf.* §§51-53). If he did so, Patrick was using, to his advantage, the system of gift giving and exchange that

existed in Ireland at the time (Bieler 1968: 119). In spite of this, Patrick still had some difficulty in his missionary work and was even imprisoned for his beliefs (*Conf.* §52). However, he seems to have escaped martyrdom as he seemed to be nearing death while writing his *Confessio*, and may well be an old man: ‘*Et haec est confessio mea antequam moriar*’ (§62).²⁴ We know that he was at least forty five years old, since it has been no less than thirty years since he committed his sin, and that was committed at the age of 15 (Dumville 1993: 15). The fact that Patrick lived to at least such an age, combined with there being no record of Patrick being put to death for his faith indicates that it is at least likely that he was not killed for his faith. His obvious attention to Irish custom could have helped him to avoid any such untimely death. While obviously we cannot be sure that he was not martyred, as we do not have a reliable account of his death, the circumstantial evidence would seem to indicate that Patrick may have died of natural causes rather than at the hands of over zealous pagans.

One question that arises is why Patrick wanted to go to Ireland in the first place. Was it simple zealotry, a sincere desire to save souls, or an attempt at personal glory? One obvious starting point was that he believed that he had been called from God to evangelise the Irish. This alone would probably have been enough to bring a faithful person to a foreign land. Additionally, in §34 of the *Confessio*, Patrick clearly regards himself as living in the last days of the world:

‘ut ego inscius et in novissimis diebus hoc opus tam pium et tam mirificum auderem adgredere, ita ut imitarem quippiam illos quos ante Dominus iam olim praedixerat praenuntiaturus evangelium suum in testimonium omnibus gentibus ante finem mundi – quod ita ergo vidimus itaque suppletum est’

²⁴ And this is my declaration before I die. (Hood 1978: 54).

Hanson argues that this type of apocalyptic sentiment was not uncommon at that time (1995: 35). Obviously, any soul that had not converted at the time of the end of the world would have been condemned to hell. Believing this, Patrick would have been aware that an entire nation could have been condemned if he had not followed God's call. Indeed, Thompson point out that such a sentiment could have coloured the whole of the corpus of writings by Patrick, who would have written more to affect the 'here and now' rather than as a testimony for future generations (1985: 106).

It is worth noting that monasticism in Ireland had at least some of its origins with Patrick. Herren points out that Patrick talks in the *Confessio* about the great, if unspecified, number of monks and nuns that he had converted, as well as the emphasis on virginity in his writings (1989: 76-84). In §42 he very specifically describes the conversion of a woman to a monastic life against the wishes of her father:

'Et etiam una benedicta Scotta genetiva nobilis pulcherrima adulta erat, quam ego baptizavi; et post paucos dies una causa venit ad nos, insinuavit nobis responsum accepisse a nuntio Dei et monuit eam ut esset virgo Christi et ipsa <et> Deo proximaret. Deo Gratias, sexta ab hac die optime et avidissime arripuit illud quod etiam omnes virgines Dei ita hoc faciunt – non sponte patrum earum, sed et persecutiones patiuntur et impropria falsa a parentibus suis et nihilominus plus augetur numerus'.
(*Conf.* §42)²⁶

²⁵ so that I, for all my ignorance, should in the last days venture to undertake such devout and wonderful work, so that I should follow to some extent the example of those who the Lord long ago foretold would proclaim His gospel as a testimony to all the nations before the end of the world — and so we have seen and so it has been fulfilled (Hood 1978: 48)

²⁶ And there was also a blessed lady of native Irish birth and high rank, very beautiful and grown up, whom I baptised; and a few days later she found a reason to come to us and indicated that she had received a message from an angel of God, and the angel had urged her too to become a virgin of Christ and to draw near to God. Thanks be to God, six days later she most commendably and enthusiastically took up that same course that all virgins of God also do – not with their fathers' consent; no, they endure persecution and their own parents' unfair reproaches, and yet their numbers grow larger and larger (Hood 1978: 50).

These conversions to a monastic life are in spite of the fact that monasticism was a relatively new idea in western Christendom at the time (Bieler 1968: 119). Indeed, it was not until the sixth century that monasticism achieved its first popular upsurge in Britain (Campbell 1982: 22). This popular upsurge of monasticism may well have been accelerated in part by the earlier Anglo-Saxon invasions. The episcopate, which had been urban, genteel, and based on Roman Episcopal models, responded to the invasions by becoming corrupt and dependent on warlord kings in order to survive in such hostile conditions. As a response to this corruption, Britain was swept by a wave of monastic reforms, which had already achieved popularity in large areas of continental Europe (Bieler 1968: 121-22).

Chapter 4

Ireland after Patrick

While Ireland had at least some virgins and monks during the mission of Patrick, it is possible that monasticism was not widespread until the small upstart dynasties began to assert themselves in the sixth and seventh centuries. However, we shall see that these monasteries were part of the church, and that pastoral interests remained one of the key elements in the Irish church. Indeed, during the early medieval period, new dynasties emerged that had recognised the political advantages of the new religion well before the rise of the monastic towns. Ó Cróinín attributes this rise to the release of the kings from the traditional taboos that the pre-Christian religion would have placed on the rulers (1995: 41). Under the pre-Christian system, or at least under the Christian perception of the pre-Christian system, the druids seem to have held considerable power both in matters of religion and politics; for example the king always had to allow the druids to speak first (Stancliffe 1980: 90-92). This can be seen in the *Mesca Ulad*, which states: ‘Óen do gessib Ulad labrad riana rí 7 óen dō gessib labrad riana druídib.’ (MU 234-35)²⁷ However, McCone convincingly asserts that the early Christians elevated the power of the druids to promote their own self-interest. Any king claiming to adhere to the faith would have to grant a bishop more authority than his ancestors were believed to have given the druid (1991: 104-06). Indeed, Ó Cróinín fails to consider the economic and political changes that other factors, such as loss of trade links with Britain after the fall of Rome, would have had

on the political environment of Ireland. Whether or not this is an accurate representation of the pagan past of Ireland, when these groups emerged from the pagan past, they successfully managed to take control of the political landscape of Ireland. These new families, with titles such as *Uí*, *Cenél*, *Clann*, and *Síl*²⁸ eclipsed the older tribal or *-raige* groupings, such as the Ciarraige, Dartraige, Múscraige, and Semonraige (Mac Neill 1911-12: 59-114). While Ó Cróinín might provide an overly simple explanation, it seems fairly certain that the period of conversion brought with it a new political reality in Ireland.

As the monastic centres in these areas grew over time, bishops and priests that were an essential part of the new faith were reduced to ecclesiastical appointments that were there to perform baptism, marriage, burial and other public services. It was also common for bishops to be monks who were detached from, but retaining control over, their monastery (Morris 1978: 11). Etchingham, who has studied this system, and the studies surrounding this problem more thoroughly (1999: 47-104), has summarised the relations between the various aspects of church governance as follows: 'The validity of the integrated model of church government, comprising episcopal, abbatial and 'coarbial' elements in one system, which was flexible in combining or separating these, would appear to be borne out' (Etchingham 1999: 104).

The monastic centres formed and evolved into sites of major importance due to the fact that these upstart dynasties realised that there were some real advantages to having a monastic centre in their kingdoms. While they may have been

²⁷ One of the *geiss* of the Ulstermen was speaking before the king and one of the *geiss* of the king was speaking before the druid.

established for religious reasons, other, more secular, reasons helped them to increase their power. Their holiness, at least to a certain extent, made them safe places of sanctuary during war. These monasteries also provided centres of learning, crafts, and religious ritual. Additionally, they could act as neutral meeting ground between two feuding factions. Kings would also often use monasteries as places of refuge, retreat, and retirement (Bethell 1981: 45).²⁹ Indeed, they may have grown out of the control of the kings. We can see in the *Collectanea* of Tírechán that by the seventh century, there were some major monastic federations that were large enough to have their own feuds between themselves:

non quaerebant aliquid a familia Dumiche nissi amicitiam tantummodo,
sed quaerit familia Clono, qui per uim tenent locos Patricii multos post
mortalitates nouissimas
(Tírechán 25.2).³⁰

During the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries in Ireland, as in the rest of Europe, Christianity was slowly beginning to create local systems that suited local needs. Since Ireland had no cities, it was necessary to organise the church in a different manner than in the former Roman areas. As these monastic towns emerged, often called *ciuitates*, their powerful abbots were often tied in with local politics and members of the ruling family (Bieler 1968: 120). Additionally, the Irish adapted their art to serve the new faith, both in terms of the symbolism used, such as crucifixes and other biblical motifs and to serve new mediums, in particular vellum (Bethell 1981: 45, Laing and Laing 1992: 138-176).

²⁸ Respectively: grandsons, kindred, children, and seed. Arguably, the most famous example of this would be the Uí Néill.

²⁹ For a complete description of the economics of the monasteries see Etchingham (1999: 394-454).

³⁰ [the bishops of Patrick] requested nothing from the community of Dumech except only their friendship, but they are claimed by the family of Clonmacnoise, as they hold many of the properties of Patrick since the recent mortality

However, as Bethell points out, many of the things that appear unique about the church in Ireland were more due to the uniqueness of the culture than to any independence of a Celtic church. For instance, because Christianity was the religion of Rome, priests were expected to dress as Romans. In artistic work depicting Pope Gregory the Great with his father, who was a Roman Senator, the two are often dressed in a similar fashion (Bethell 1981: 41). Additionally, in a letter to the Bishops of Provence Pope Celestine I even condemned priests who wore any special costume to indicate their status (Bethell 1981: 41). While in Rome this made priests seem normal, in Ireland it was seen as unique dress which made the clergy stand out.³¹ Eventually, they became compared to the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament (Bethell 1981: 41-42). Additionally, because people did not know Latin in Ireland, gesture and ritual may have been increased during mass to better communicate the messages (Bethell 1981: 41-42). The impact of Christianity, or more specifically Latin and writing, on the Irish language was considerable:

‘The Irish language underwent several major and minor phonological and structural changes between its Primitive and Old periods. It might be said, indeed, that it changed more during that time than it ever had done since.’

(McManus 1991: 84)

The *vita* of Patrick was not committed to vellum until the seventh century when Muirchú wrote a *Vita* of the saint. It is of course possible that there was an earlier text. For example, Tírechán, in his brief preamble to the *Colleceanea* mentions an earlier work by Ultán. If indeed this work was earlier, it may have been more similar to Tírechán’s work than Muirchú’s. In any case, Muirchú is both the earliest surviving text and additionally, while he admits that others have attempted to write a

³¹ For more information about the dress of the Irish clergy see Bethell (1981: 41-2).

life, none have arrived at a definitive edition. He would seem to think that he has succeeded at that task (Muirchú *Preface*.1-3).

It goes without saying that the written works of authors like Muirchú and Tírechán, written two centuries after the events that they purport to describe, are not entirely reliable. Indeed, scholars from the medieval period faced at least one of the same problems that we do today, namely inadequate records. As a result of this, they often tended to project from their society and time onto the past (De Paor 1993: 23). Because of this, their interpretation of past events cannot be taken to be an accurate picture of the saint and his times. Binchy rightly points out that the only truly reliable sources about the historical figure of Patrick are those written by the saint's own hand, namely, the *Confessio* and the *Epistola* (1962: 164-65). Indeed, Binchy expands upon this view, rejecting the authenticity of the other texts that were believed to be by Patrick, especially the *Book of Armagh*, and assaulting the notion that the facts of Patrick's historical life can be gained by the later material, especially the *vitae* (1962: 45-52).

The *vita* by Muirchú and the *Collectanea* by Tírechán are the two earliest surviving *vitae* of Saint Patrick, if indeed the *Collectanea* can be called a *vita*. Most parts of these lives, with the exception of those sections that we can verify from other sources, such as the writings of Patrick himself, include information that should be treated as suspect in any attempt to try to come to terms with the historical Patrick. Muirchú tells us that Patrick went to Rome before his mission to Ireland. On the way to Rome, Patrick met Germanus in Gaul. Patrick stayed with him for thirty to forty years before Victorinus appeared to Patrick and told him that the Irish wished for him to return (Muirchú 6(5)-7(6)). All of this is probably not true, rather, it would appear

to be an attempt by Muirchú to synchronise three different beliefs about Patrick; namely that he went to Rome, that he studied with Germanus in Gaul, and the story of Victorinus told in the *Confessio* (De Paor 1993: 40). Morris argues that Patrick may well have studied with Germanus. We have seen that Germanus was sent to Britain to stamp out the Pelagian heresy. Such a powerful ally would have been useful for Patrick to have in his attempts to overcome opposition to his mission to Ireland (Morris 1978: 5). Muirchú then goes on to tell us that a priest, named Segitius, was sent by Germanus to accompany Patrick and act as a witness (Muirchú 8(7)). On the way, Patrick heard that Palladius had left Ireland and died in Britain. Patrick then visited Amatorex and was consecrated as a bishop so that he might replace Palladius in Ireland (Muirchú 9(10)). It is possible that this represents a confusion of Patrick and Palladius. A more likely explanation is that it is simply the writing of a rival of Patrick out of the story. On that same day that Patrick was consecrated as bishop, Auxilius and Secundinus, two of Patrick's helpers, were given lesser orders.

One aspect of the Patrician lives that should not be ignored is the controversy about whether or not Patrick was confused with Palladius. Amatorex may be a version of the name Amator, who was Germanus's predecessor at Auxerre. Amator was dead by at least 429 when Germanus was already a bishop, and there is no earlier record that he had anything to do with Patrick. However, it was Amator that conferred the order of deacon on Palladius. It is possible that this aspect of the life Palladius was absorbed into the Patrician myth (De Paor 1993: 40). Indeed, such a possibility may have occurred to Tírechán, who wrote in his *Collectanea* that Palladius was also called Patricius:

Palladius episcopus primo mittitur, qui Patricius alio nomine appellabatur, qui martyrium passus est apud Scottos, ut tradunt sancti antiqui. Deinde Patricius secundus ab angelo Dei Victor nomine et a Celestino papa mittitur, cui Hibernia tota credidit, qui eam pene totam babtizauit.
(56.2-3)³²

The name Patricius was imported into the Irish language as *cothraige*, which was used as a word for bishop.³³ Palladius continued to be called *Cothraige* in Irish tradition, whereas Patrick kept his birth name (De Búrca 1965: 284-85). In addition to the name, the death of Patrick is recorded twice in the *AU*. It is recorded in the *AU* first at 457 for Sen Phátricc and again at 461, which is given as a possible different obit for the same figure. The second record in the *AU* for the death of a Patrick is given as 492. It is possible that either there were two 'Patricks', or, to make this argument more feasible, that the earlier date, and thus the first Patrick, represents Palladius (Chadwick 1960: 18, Binchy 1962: 164).³⁴

As we have seen, Palladius does survive as a figure in the Irish literature, but he is regarded as a failure who had a minimal impact on Irish culture. Most of the stories in the texts after the seventh century about Palladius are speculation, possibly based to a certain degree on the texts of Prosper (De Paor 1993: 39). There is still a surprising lack of evidence about Palladius, even if we were to accept the opinion of scholars such as Carney (1961) and O' Rahilly (1942) that Palladius was absorbed into the Patrician myth. This absorption could have been accelerated by the fact that

³² Bishop Palladius was sent first, who was also named Patrick by another name, who was martyred by the Scots without distinction, according to the traditions of the old holy men. Then Patrick was sent second, by the angel of God named Victor and by Pope Celestine. It was he whom all of Ireland believed, he baptised almost all of them.

³³ There has been much work done on the equation of 'Patrick' with 'Cothraige'. The most recent of which is Ó Riain (1997). This also includes a survey of works dealing with this question.

³⁴ James Carney takes a more elaborate view of this, seeing Secundinus as a predecessor of Patrick, and Patrick as arriving on 5 April 456. In addition, he sees Palladius as a missionary to Scotland. For more on this see Carney (1961: 14-21).

the Patrician biographers would not have wanted competition for Patrick. Especially if that competitor had been sent by the Pope and may well have been more learned than their patron saint. Such competition would not have been fruitful to a group trying to promote a saint who did not have much support from the church in Britain and was not well educated (Dumville 1993: 65). While they could not deny the existence of such an important figure, it was easy enough for them to dismiss his works in Ireland as a failure.

While the Patrician biographers were selectively absorbing aspects of the Palladian mission into Patrick, they also tried to dismiss his efforts by discrediting his work as a failure. This may have been the product of misunderstanding his mission as well. He may not have converted the whole of Ireland. However, Bieler argues that if his mission was to stamp out Pelagianism among those who are already Christian, that might not have needed the great length of time that a prolonged mission with an aim to convert would take (1968: 115). The brief period of time for the mission could have been perceived as a failure by hostile interpreters, but may equally indicate a quick success in stamping out a heresy in Ireland (Bieler 1968: 115). In spite of this perceived failure, Palladius was recorded in the later *Tripartite Life* as having set up several churches in Leinster in Co. Wicklow (*The Tripartite Life of Saint Patrick* 30. 11-24). Whether or not these foundations actually represent the efforts of Palladius cannot be known without further investigation that would be beyond the scope of the research of this thesis.

Patrick and Palladius may not have been the earliest to evangelise the Irish, it is worth mentioning that there were a number of saints who were believed to have been active in Ireland before Patrick. Most of these saints were thought to have

existed in the south and south-east of Ireland that faced the Roman provinces along the Atlantic coast, and mostly have British names (O' Rahilly 1942: 41). These saints are Ciarán of Saigir in Ossory, Declán of Ardmore, Ibar of Becc-Ériu in Wexford Harbour, and Ailbe of Emly. Their *vitae*, while containing some earlier elements, date to the twelfth century and their primary sources cannot be dated (Bieler 1968: 114). Ciarán and Declán are both described as bishops, which Bieler points out is incompatible with the information given by Prosper about Palladius, and possibly indicates that the *vitae* are not completely reliable (1968: 114). The most recent scholar to look at these early saints has been Richard Sharpe (1989).³⁵ He considers the fact that almost all of these saint's *vitae* which make these claims date from the twelfth century, much later than the events they purport to describe or even the earlier hagiographical traditions of Patrick. This would seem to indicate that these later texts are probably more indicative of the later ambitions of some Munster centres than the historical reality of fourth and fifth century Ireland (1989: 396-97).³⁶ Sharpe also points out that two of these saints are given *AU* obits later than Patrick – Ailbe (†527) and Ibar (†500) (1989: 397).

In addition to these pre-Patrician saints, four other bishops were credited with helping Patrick: Auxilius, Secundinus, Iserninus, and Benignus. Dumville makes a case that these figures may have been seventh century inventions, or titles for real people, as each of the names seems to describe their roles in the mission, which possibly means that they are merely titles. Auxilius was Patrick's helper, Secundinus was the second in command, Iserninus was the hard man of the mission, and

³⁵ It is worth noting that Sharpe's article summarises and examines most of the work on these saints. For a full description see Sharpe (1989).

³⁶ Sharpe notes that the one exception to this may be Saint Ailbe's *vita*, which may reflect eighth

Benignus was the kind member of the mission (Dumville 1993: 89). Auxilius, Secundinus, and Iserninus were, according to the *Annals of Ulster*, sent in 439 to help Patrick, and they were attributed with the establishment of a number of churches in the East Midlands. It is possible that, if they even did exist, they reflected independent founders rather than assistants to Patrick (Bieler 1968: 120). Secundinus was credited with having established Dunshaughlin while Killassy or Killashee was believed to have been established by Auxilius. Iserninus was thought to have set up Aghade and Kilcullen (De Paor 1993: 41). It should be mentioned that De Paor points out that the establishment of Kilcullen was also attributed to a figure called MacTáil (De Paor 1993: 41).

Of course, one saint from this period who cannot be ignored is Saint Brigit. Unfortunately, we know very little about her historical person. The Annals show remarkable consistency at placing her death in the early 520's, without any of the difficulties that we see in placing the obit of Patrick (*AU* 523 or 525, *CS* 523, *ACM* 522). However, the date of her birth and her age at death are not always consistent. *ACM* records her birth in 425, but her obit in 522 states that she was either 27 or 70 when she died. *CS* records her birth in 439, and states in her obit of 523 that she was 87 or 77, even though the maths makes her 84. Interestingly, the *CS* also records that she was born on the 8th of February, took the veil on the 18th of February, and died on the 28th of February, which would seem to conflict with the fact that her festival falls on the first of February.

The most mathematically accurate annal, in term of the length of time between the birth and death of the saint, would seem to be the *AU*, which states that

century ambitions of Emly (1989: 396).

Brigit was born in 456 and died at the age of 70, which is only one to three years off their obit for the saint. It should be noted that Daniel McCarthy has recently argued that the 439 – 524 reading, based on the *Iona Chronicle* might be more accurate based on the fact that they may have been written by Columba, a near contemporary of Brigit (2000: 280). Unfortunately, even if the 520's obits found in the various annal are roughly correct, we cannot rely on these to give any factual information about her historical life. In fact we have almost no information that one can use to point reliably to an historical figure of Brigit. One intriguing theory that must be mentioned is MacAlister's colourful theory that Brigit was a pagan priestess, who took the name of her patron goddess, but later converted herself, and her community (1919: 340-41). Unfortunately, this theory, while certainly possible, has no evidence to support it.

Chapter 5

The Growth of the Church

We have already seen that Christianity was accompanied by a growth in monastic towns in Ireland. While we have examined what these centres meant to the society at large, we still need to examine their role in the development of the church. A good place to begin this discussion would be by defining exactly what the terms monastic town and monastery mean. These terms immediately create an image of a group of cloistered men and women living apart from society under the auspices of an abbot or abbess, with lives in accordance with strict rules on personal issues and devoted to prayer and personal salvation. In contrast to this, the episcopally organised church was local and dealt with the lay community performing such services as baptism, marriage, and funerals. However, in early medieval Ireland there seems to be no clear dividing line between these two types of churches; while the debate as to where these lines should be drawn continues amongst modern scholars it was probably heavily debated among scholars in the sixth and seventh centuries as well (Sharpe 1984: 260-61, 239). In the legal texts we find the terms *epscop túaithe* and *clericus plebis*, which Sharpe defines as ‘bishop in the lay community’ and ‘priest in the lay community’ respectively (1984: 260). Sharpe points out that this is less definitive in terms of sphere of influence than the more familiar priest of the parish or a bishop of the diocese. On the other hand however, he points out that this would imply that there were priests and monks not active within the lay community but rather their main sphere of activity seems to have been in the monasteries themselves (1984: 260).

The church in early medieval Ireland seems to have evolved into an organisation based around a few large powerful monastic towns, such as Kildare, Clonmacnoise, and Armagh. However, this should not be taken to mean that these were the only church structures. Thomas Charles-Edwards points out that in the eighth century the laws assume a fairly dense distribution of churches. To use his example, one eighth century secular law text gives clear instructions on what to do if a person should find a stray horse (1992: 64, *CIH* 577.31-578.9). First, the horse is to be tethered, then, if the owner is known, he is to be informed that the horse has been found. If the owner is not known, the find is to be announced at the nearest fort of the ruler, then at the judge of the *túath*'s fort, then the local smithy, and the finally, it is to be announced at the chief church of the *túath*. Charles-Edwards points out that in this case the word *túath* is being used in a territorial sense, and usually refers to an area of about ten to fifteen miles across, indicating a chief church about once every one to two hundred square miles, and further indicating an unknown number of subordinate churches (1992: 64). Sharpe estimates, based on place names and sources such as the saints' lives, and annals, that there were approximately 250 churches in Ireland before 800, a far higher concentration than in England, France or Spain (Sharpe 1992: 88-89).

At the head of each church was the *princeps* (OIr. *airchinnech*), who may have ruled over monks or clerics. Picard has recently compared this figure to the tribal king, responsible for the administration of his realm, or in this case church (2000: 153-155). Indeed, according to the *Annals of Ulster*, in 885 Muiredach mac

Brain: 'rex Lagenensium 7 princeps Cille Dara, dormiuit.'³⁷ More commonly, however, the *princeps* may have been either a monk, specifically an abbot, or a bishop (*CCH* xxxvii.7-39, xli.3, cf. Charles Edwards 1992: 67). This model of the princeps as ruler of a church has its base in the writings of Augustine, who saw Moses as the princeps and Aaron held the priestly role of the sacerdos (Picard 2000: 149). Indeed, Picard points out that this model persisted in Ireland until the twelfth century; it was after the Synod of Kells in 1152 that the Irish conformed to the rest of Europe and placed the holder of the title of bishop as the head of the church (Picard 2000: 156-57). It is worth reminding ourselves that the *princeps* was also often the bishop, so that in many cases this may not have constituted an administrative change in the churches.

However, Charles-Edwards points out that it would not be surprising for the head church of a *túath* to be both episcopal and monastic, and for the *princeps* to be both an abbot and a bishop (1992: 67). With all this confusion, it can sometimes be very difficult trying to distinguish who the heads of the various churches were. Furthermore, the notion of a head church would imply that each *túath* had several churches, each of which could have had people with different titles.

Many of these foundations began to flourish after a plague, known as *Buide Conaill*, in the 550's. Hughes equates this plague with the Justinian Plague, which ravaged Europe at about this time (1966: 67). In the *Annals* there is some confusion as to the date of the plague. *ACM* lists the plague as arriving in 550, with another plague, called the sawtooth plague arriving in 552, which was the year that Pope Vigilius died and was replaced by Pelagius. *CS* lists the plague as arriving in 551,

³⁷ King of Leinster and *princeps* of Kildare, died

the sawtooth plague as arriving 554, and Vigilius dying in 555. *AU* saw the *buide conaill* as arriving on the same year that Pelagius took office, namely 555. For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that the plague arrived in the early to mid 550's, after which there was a rise in the upstart churches.

During the time of these plagues the populations of many of the earliest churches decreased substantially. Indeed, the decimation were so great that many of these foundations disappeared altogether. The time of recovery afterwards lead to many new foundations emerging in their place (De Paor 1971: 98-99). Over the centuries, many settlements began to grow into what are now called 'monastic towns'. These settlements do not really conform to the concept of a monastery described above. The lands of these monastic towns were under the control of a coarb, the ruler of the secular aspects of the monastery, who, like any *princeps* could be an abbot, bishop, or even a layman (Sharpe 1984: 264). These large centres also allowed for organisational centres in the midst of an island with no high degree of secular political bureaucracy (Binchy 1967: 219). In addition to gaining revenue from the tenants living on their land, monastic sites also gained revenue from people within their *paruchia*, but not living on land owned by the church. Secular lords and other individuals living on land not owned by the church would still have been a source of income for the church, as they would still have had to pay tithes. Additionally, they would have to pay for services such as burial and baptism (Etchingham 1991: 118). However, recently Etchingham has shown, by careful analysis of the legal tracts, that while pastoral dues may have, in principle at any rate, applied to the general populace of Ireland, there was no legal binding on people to pay them. It would seem that the only completely reliable source of income on which

the church could rely upon came from those lay *manaig* who lived on church property, and thus owed the church a share of their crops (1999: 249-271). In other words, the only income for the church that was fully reliable came from its own land. Otherwise, it was a question of charity and circumstances.

Sharpe rightly argues that the term *paruchia* is one that needs careful discussion and definition (1984: 243). Strictly speaking, a *paruchia* is the pastoral jurisdiction of a bishop, who in Ireland often seems to have also held the office of the abbot (Etchingham 1993: 162). Of course, in later times, it simply came to mean a parish (Etchingham 1993: 139). The word itself is a Hiberno-Latinisation of the Late Latin word *parochia* (Sharpe 1984: 244). Throughout medieval Europe, *parochia* typically denoted a large episcopal domain, sometimes as large as a province or diocese, although later it came to mean parish (Etchingham 1993: 148, Sharpe 1984: 244). It has long been assumed that there was a transition from episcopal to monastic structure in the sixth century. Kathleen Hughes seemed to have confirmed this when she noticed that there was a pattern to the time periods when abbots or bishops dominated the obits in the annals. Before 549, most of the obits were episcopal, then, until 600 there is a rough balance between abbots and episcopal obits. After 600 abbots seem to dominate in the annals (1966: 65-76). While Hughes notes that the *vitae* of Columbanus, Columba, and Vinnian support this, Sharpe points out that the chroniclers might have been attempting to synchronise these works with the period of the great monastic founders in the second half of the sixth century (Hughes 1966: 67-68, Sharpe 1984: 248). Additionally, obits pre-dating 549 are often derived from the Patrician texts and are therefore not always reliable (Sharpe 1984: 248). Of course, the Patrician texts do not contain dates. However, by being associated with

Patrick, many people were placed within the time frame of his life. Indeed, this would seem to give considerable grounds for doubting whether there was ever such a transition.

Part of the complexity of this problem can be cleared up by examining the relationship between these great monasteries and the ecclesiastical structure of the church in Ireland. Sharpe argues that the episcopal, abbatial, and temporal authority of the church was probably organised within a single system, and that they saw themselves as part of the same church (1984: 239-40). This is not to say that the entire church was in a constant state of brotherly love. It is more likely that the church grew in a way that it suited local needs and situations rather than any pan-Irish organisation. While rank and position were most likely respected, conflicting local interests could lead to spirited feuds and even battles. Part of the problem was that there was no central authority to which the monasteries could appeal. Indeed, the lack of an agreed authority amongst the various *paruchia* was so extreme that when there was disagreement between the monasteries considerable tension could result. These tensions were so frequent that battle and strife was not an uncommon outcome (Sharpe 1984: 241-42, Hughes 1973: 34). Many of these battles were over control of the *paruchia* and the rights accorded to the ruling church. This is not to say that every dispute over *paruchia* was settled by violence. For example, in the *vita* of Carthach or Mochutu of Lismore a partition of the *paruchia* of the Ciarraige between Carthach and Brénaind is considered. The issue is resolved by proximity unless they are of equal distance. If that is the case, it should be distributed according to popular choice. If that should fail it would go the centre with episcopal seniority (*VSH*: 291-299, cf. Etchingham 1993: 142, 152).

It is clear that one of the responsibilities that a church had was the pastoral care over the lay communities living in the *paruchia*. While it has been stated the it was not a guaranteed source of income, the communities on privately owned land could have been a great source of income to the church, especially during bountiful times, as the lay community would pay tithes. Additionally, lay people were willing to pay for services such as burial. Indeed, recent research, especially into the Old Irish *Ríagail Phátraic* by Sharpe (1984, 1992), Charles-Edwards (1992, 2000), and Etchingham (1993, 1999) has shown that the pastoral obligations of the church were widespread. Charles-Edwards has pointed out that the main obligations of the churches were sacramental and intercessory, offering baptism, communion, as well as psalms and prayers on behalf of the dead (1992: 69). Sharpe has taken this further by detailing the sacraments that the churches were required to offer to their parishioners.³⁸ Baptism was frequently mentioned in the texts, including *Paenitentiale Uinniani* (§48), *Paenitentiale Cummeani* (ii.32), and *Ríagail Phátraic* (§§1,5,7). In *Ríagail Phátraic* §3 a person who is confirmed is to ‘mane té fó láim n-epscoip’,³⁹ and Monenna is mentioned as being part of the crowds ‘...ut sacro baptismatis fonte tingerentur ac manuum impositione confirmarentur...’⁴⁰ in the *Vita S. Darerca* § 1.⁴¹ Mass and Confession are both mentioned numerous times in numerous texts, for instance, when two nuns refuse to eat their portions, given to them by St. Ibor during Lent, the food turned into two serpents. When Brigit and Ibor prayed for the nuns ‘the two serpents were changed into two hosts of the purest

³⁸ What follows is a brief summary of Sharpe (1992: 82).

³⁹ ‘go under the hand of a bishop’

⁴⁰ ... to be dipped in the holy baptismal font and to be confirmed by the laying of hands...

and whitest bread and one host was given to bishop Ibor and the other offered to saint Brigit, and they were the hosts for the Eucharist and Christmas' (*Vita I* §51). Additionally, we see water being turned to wine to be used in the Eucharist (*Vita I* §60), and a king being forgiven upon repenting (*Vita I* §66). Finally, the *Riagail Phátraic* §6 states that every churchyard was expected to have a graveyard, this is in spite of the fact that it still may have been common for Christians to be interred in secular grounds.⁴² The pastoral nature of the Irish church can also be seen in the number of local churches. We have seen the ruling regarding the finding of a stray horse in the *CIH*, which would indicate that there were chief churches in every *túath*.

In order for such a structure to exist, it would seem that the central figure of the church would have to be a bishop. Indeed, the *Riagail Phátraic* states that every *túath* had a *prímepsco*, which would indicate lesser bishops within the *túath*. In the same passage, the text also states that there was an ordained man for every church (*Riagail Phátraic* §1), which caused Sharpe to estimate the number of bishops in Ireland to be roughly one hundred fifty (1992: 107). Charles-Edwards points out that the *Hibernensis* defines a picture of the political structure of the province as consisting of one king and 'three lesser powers' under him, and one bishop and three lesser bishops (*CCH* xx.2). Charles-Edwards believes that these lesser bishops were the bishops of the *túath* (1992: 68). Sharpe also points out that there would have been about 50 of the higher bishops, supporting his estimate of approximately 150 bishops (Sharpe 1992: 107).

⁴¹ The Salmanticensis life of Cú Chu dates from the fourteen century, although numerous scholars, including Bray (1999: 172), and Kenney (1929: 367-368), as well as others have dated the materials within it from the seventh or eighth centuries.

⁴² cf. *Tírechán* § 41

That the bishop was associated with a specific paruchia is clearly shown in the *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*:

‘Sinodus: Episcopus, qui alterius episcopi [vel alicujus abbatis] parochiam rapit, excommunicandus est nisi legitimo ordine peniteat’
(*CCH* i.22)⁴³

Indeed, there are numerous examples in the *CCH*, the two ‘Synods of Saint Patrick’ found in the penitentials, as well as in hagiographic literature, which clearly show that the paruchia was the domain of the bishop.⁴⁴ Etchingham points out that within this domain, the bishop wielded immense power. In the eighth century *Críth Gablach*, the bishop, king, judge and *sui*⁴⁵ are all entitled to hospitality (§15). Indeed, the closing passage of the text states that only the king and bishop are entitled to hospitality for a retinue of up to twelve people; this passage concludes by stating that the bishop is the more venerable of the two, and that king should rise for the bishop (*Críth Gablach* §§46-47). Etchingham gives a comprehensive list of examples in law texts where the bishop was seen as superior to the king (1999: 69-70)

Interestingly, while the bishop was a crucial, powerful and pastoral figure, Etchingham points out that he is often not depicted handling temporal matters (1999: 83). Indeed, this role fell to the coarb. As we have seen above, the coarb was the manager of the large monastic centres. The coarb acted as a land agent and controlled the rent and usage of these lands, thus gaining political power both for himself and for his kingroup. As these lands grew, the role of the coarb became increasingly concerned with the management of the lay community and monastic

⁴³ A synod : A bishop, who steals the parish of another bishop [also of any abbot] is to be excommunicated, unless he repents in a legitimate way.

⁴⁴ For a full examination of these examples see Etchingham (1993: 140-153).

grounds and less with spiritual matters (Sharpe 1984: 263). However, since it was monastic grounds, this role usually fell to an abbot who governed the laity living on church grounds in secular affairs, while the bishop handled spiritual affairs (Etchingham 1999: 83). Charles-Edwards points out that both normal monks and monastic tenants, that is lay people living on monastic lands, were called *monachus* (Ir. *manach*), indicating that both of these figures were under the control of an abbot (1992: 67).

However, this complex situation is exacerbated by the fact that in Ireland, we are faced with the unusual situation that there was a great deal of interchangeability between the various positions of authority within the church. Indeed, Etchingham has noted 218 bishops in the annals between 750 and 1000, 97 of these are given another title, 49 of which were called abbot, 28 were called *princeps* / *airchinnech*, 18 *heres* / *comarbae*, 1 *cenn* and 1 *riaglóir*. This indicates that forty-five percent of bishops have directing authority over churches (Etchingham 1999: 101).⁴⁶ It is worth remembering that while the western church was united in doctrine, it showed a remarkable variety in its liturgical practices (Hughes 1965: 8). That the episcopal and monastic aspects were combined was not unique, as we have seen, Saint Martin of Tours was one example of a person involved in such a situation. What is unique is that while the practice was so widespread in Ireland, it did not seem to exist anywhere on the continent in such a widespread fashion (Ó Cróinín 1995: 147). It cannot be said for sure how this situation came about. Sharpe argues that the position of the abbot was regarded as more of a political position than a spiritual one.

⁴⁵ DIL: man of learning, scholar, wiseman, sage

⁴⁶ Etchingham has researched this in great detail, and it is supported by additional evidence from Latin and vernacular texts, as well as hagiographical sources. For a more detail see (1999: 47-104).

Sharpe points out that this is not surprising given the large size of the *clientela* (Ir. *céilsine*), or clients, of many of the churches. Monastic clients were referred to as *manaig*, which could have helped to increase the numbers regarded as being bound to the church (1992: 81-109).

Sharpe theorised that when the bishop and the abbot were separate people, they most likely lived together in the same monastic centres. The bishop's responsibility was to be in charge of the pastoral needs of the lay members of the community or *túath*. As the role of the abbot, who was in charge of the monastic community, became secularised the responsibility of the two offices may have began to overlap. As a result, the two separate roles would have been unnecessary and the offices may have been combined (Sharpe 1984: 263-64).⁴⁷ In cases where the offices remained separate, the bishop probably would have been the more powerful office. In the eighth century *Riagail Phátraic* the bishop is clearly defined as being the soul friend of the abbot, which would have put him in a superior position over the abbot:

Prímepscof cecha túaithe accu fri huirdned a n-óessa gráid, fri coisecrad a n-eclas 7 fri hanmchairdes do flaithib 7 do airchindchib, fri nóemad 7 bendchad a clainde iar mbáthius.
(*Riagail Phátraic* §46)⁴⁸

Additionally, the text states that:

Cach epscof tra sóerta túatha 7 eclaisi is é as anmchara dond áes gráid, 7 is lais dogníad urddu téchtai, 7 is é dobeir fortacht dóib co roiset a n-dliged hi túaith 7 i n-eclais, 7 is e timairg for cech eclais co raib a durrthech 7 a relec hi n-glaine, 7 co raib in altóir cona haidmib téchtib ar chind ind óessa gráid dogrés.
(*Riagail Phátraic* §6)⁴⁹

⁴⁷ For a fuller explanation of this theory see Sharpe (1984: 263).

⁴⁸ An archbishop for each tribe to see to the appointing of clergy, to consecrate their churches, and to give spiritual direction to lords and erenachs, and to consecrate and bless their children after baptism.

⁴⁹ Each bishop whom tribes and churches raise up, he is soul-friend to the clergy, and it is with him that they assign their due rights, and it is he who gives help to them so that they attain their rights both

While access to a bishop is a necessary component of any Christian church, it is worth noting that we cannot state clearly whether it was the monastic centre or the episcopal church, both of which could house a bishop, which emerged first. Iona, which began as a monastic centre, eventually gave rise to Kells, which had greater pastoral interests. On the other hand, Armagh most likely began as the seat of a bishop as there was no model for the type of monastic centre that it eventually became (Sharpe 1984: 261-63, Bury 1905: 375).

One of the major debates in early Irish history concerns whether the *paruchia* were controlled geographic areas or if they were scattered randomly throughout the country. One of the first influential thinkers on this subject was Kenney, who argued that the *paruchia* consisted of scattered monastic churches most of which identified with a 'mother-church' (Kenney 1929: 292). Ryan responded to this by pointing out that there were numerous bishops that seem not to have taken monastic vows, and that these bishops maintained territorial spheres of influence (1931: 189-90). However, Sharpe points out that Ryan was focused on monastic matters in his book, and failure to explain the nature of the bishops' influence may be due to this focus (Sharpe 1984: 232). While, many early scholars such as Ryan and Bury assumed that the *paruchia* were organised along territorial lines (Ryan 1931: 187, Bury 1905: 244), it was Kenney's structure of scattered *paruchia* that would eventually become the orthodoxy amongst scholars. Additionally, Todd's view that the church made a transition from diocesan to monastic focus also became part of the scholarly canon (Kenney 1929, Todd 1864). It was Kathleen Hughes who most

in the tribe and church, and it is he who ensures for each church that the oratory and burial-ground are

masterfully argued for this position. While she stressed the diversity of the early church (1966: ix-x), and modified the time line of the events, she argued that in the fifth and sixth centuries the *paruchia* was defined by boundaries. It was only in the later sixth and early seventh centuries that it became scattered (Hughes 1966: 44-249). This argument was later bolstered by Binchy, who assumed that the 'tribal, rural, hierarchical and familiar' structure of Ireland suited the scattered monastic model better than a diocesan model could (1967: 219). However, Sharpe points out that Anglo-Saxon England, which worked on a diocesan system, would have also been a culture that matched the 'tribal, rural' model (1984: 242). Sharpe points out that many of the texts which support a territorial and diocesan model, such as *Tírechán*, were seen as being a reflection of Patrick's time or dismissed as a set of later forged claims, such as with the *Liber Angeli* (1984: 249-50). Sharpe summarises the confusion most succinctly when he says:

'I am obliged to admit that the evidence supports both sides, pointing now to a territorial element in church organisation, now to non-territorial units, or on the one hand to episcopal government and on the other to government in the control of presbyter abbots.'
(1984: 233)

However, Sharpe realised that monasticism does not make for a Christian society, and that no matter how monastic a society might seem, a pastoral element was necessary (1984: 241). He tried to reconcile this confusion by arguing that the *paruchia* was a diocesan system, based around the territorial sphere of the bishop, while the *familia* was simply the monastic group that formed the centre of certain communities, most famously that of the Columba (1984: 244-47). He points out that the Iona annals do not use the term *paruchia* to define the community there, rather

pure and that the altar has its correct fittings ready for the clergy at all times.

they use the term *familia lae*. It is from the fact that the Columban federation was a monastic one headed by a presbyter abbot that he concludes that *familia* must refer to the monks (Sharpe 1984: 244-45). Of course he does point out that in the ninth century some of the dependencies of Iona, such as Tiree, begin to act as pastoral foundations. But he points out that it was only after the foundation of Kells in 814 according to the *AU* that a Columban *paruchia* began to form (1984: 245). It is worth noting that according to Herbert, Kells, although a major ecclesiastical site, did not see itself as the premier Columban church until the eleventh century (1996b: 88).

The most recent scholar to take up this question has been Etchingham. He points out that this system is contrary to other arguments put forth by Sharpe, which try to argue against the division between the episcopal and the monastic sides of the church (1999: 126). By looking at the seventh to eighth century⁵⁰ *Liber Angeli*, which seems to claim all of Ireland except Leinster for Patrick, he shows that there was obviously some sort of geographical element to *paruchia* in the seventh and eighth centuries. In addition, the *Vita I* and *Bethu Brigitte* reveal geographical boundaries as well, such as when Brigit declared that the kingdom of Connacht would be part of her *paruchia* (*Vita I* §§11.2-3, *Bethu Brigitte* §4; Etchingham 1993: 151). More recently, Etchingham responded directly to Sharpe and revised his views by pointing out that *familia* seems to refer to numerous monasteries in various texts, for instance Tírechán's attack on those who have plundered parts of Armagh's *paruchia* by saying that they do not love his *familia* (Tírechán 18, Etchingham 1999: 127-28).⁵¹ He goes on to point out the term *familia* can have a flexible meaning, for

⁵⁰ For a more detailed reading of the complexities of the dating of the *Liber Angeli* see Bieler (*The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* 1979: 54 n. 1).

⁵¹ For a complete listing of these texts see Etchingham (1999: 127-8).

instance the *familia Iae*, and the *familia Dermaige*,⁵² both are part of the *familia Columbae Cille* (Etchingham 1999: 129). Which would indicate that the *familia* could refer to both the monastic core of a community or to the community as a whole indicating that two methods of organisation co-existed with the same system (Etchingham 1999: 130). Within this system, as we have seen, it was the bishops who were dominant, and defined the territory along diocesan and territorial lines.

Of all the monastic centres, it was Armagh that was eventually seen as the head of the churches in Ireland. Armagh not only claimed episcopal authority for itself, but also vast property, metropolitan authority, and the majority of Ireland as its *paruchia* (Sharpe 1984: 249). The basis for this claim stems from the belief that Patrick founded Armagh and made it the seat of his successors. Because Patrick was the apostle of the Irish, Armagh was therefore the chief church of Ireland (De Paor 1971: 102). Whether or not this is historically the case we do not know as Patrick himself makes no mention of Armagh or any other foundations in his own writings (Dumville 1993: 152). In the *Collectanea* by Tírechán Patrick names Benignus as the successor of Armagh and as successor to Patrick himself:

...et dixit Patricius 'baptizate eum et eleuate eum in currum quia heres regni mei est'. Ipse est Benignus episcopus, successor Patricii in aeclessia Machae
(Tírechán 5.5)⁵³

However, Tírechán probably writing in the early to mid eighth century emphasises that there are two great churches of Patrick, not just the one; the second church being in the wood of Fochluth south-west of Killala Bay in County Mayo (*Tírechán* 14.6; Swift 1994: 68). Though by the time of the writing of the *Liber Angeli* in the mid

⁵² Families of Iona and Durrow respectively.

seventh or early eighth centuries it is clear that Armagh at this time was the head of the Patrician federation.

Armagh would have been an unlikely candidate to achieve the power and status that it eventually did achieve. It was situated first in the territory of the Ulaid, and then, after Uí Néill invaded, on the land of the politically weak Airgialla and it did not hold the remains of Patrick, which would have seriously weakened its claims to primacy (Doherty 1984: 92-93). Part of the success of Armagh had to do with the fact that it had managed to ally itself with the Uí Néill. Why the Uí Néill should have favoured Armagh over local monasteries such as Secundinus's foundation at Dunshaughlin or Iona, which was founded by Columba, a member of the Uí Néill himself is something of a mystery. McCone argues that one likely reason for this support was the fact that Armagh was roughly equidistant between the Northern and Southern Uí Néill as well as being on friendly soil (1982: 137). This is still a relatively weak starting position in comparison to Kildare, which was backed by the relatively powerful Uí Dúnlainge which had as its royal centre at Dún Ailinne, which was only seven or eight miles from Kildare (Ó Briain 1940: 454). Kildare also had the advantage of having a patron saint that shared a common name with a pre-Christian goddess, which certainly would have given an advantage to the interests of the community. There are numerous place names throughout Ireland, such as Cell Brigte and Topar Brigte, which may have their roots, of at least the Brigit element, in the name of the pre-Christian goddess rather than the saint. However, these 'Brigit'

⁵³ Patrick said: 'Baptise him and elevate him into the chariot since he is the heir to my kingdom'. This is Bishop Benignus, successor of Patrick in the church of Machae.

place names would have afforded Kildare an excellent opportunity to promote its own claims to numerous churches throughout Ireland (McCone 1982: 110-11).

Armagh's claim to primacy was not automatic or universally accepted. The *Book of Armagh* is the book that sets out the claims of Armagh in the late eighth or early ninth century. It is not the only codex to do so since many of the later works on Saint Patrick are designed to promote the interests of Armagh or, as is the possibility in the case of Tírechán, another church within the Patrician federation (De Paor 1971: 95, Swift 1994: 81-82). Swift argues convincingly that Tírechán, while certainly loyal to Armagh, is more concerned with the interests of a second church, which seems to have been under attack at the time of writing. She argues that the motive of Tírechán may have been the result of seeking help from a king of Tara against these attackers (1994: 81).

The book was probably not an official document, but was the property of Torbach, who was an abbot of the monastery who would have been eager to justify the claims of his community (Doherty 1991: 59). Central to the claims of Armagh was its position within the paschal controversy, which may have been the driving force behind the older churches developing common policies to defend their position based on their seniority over other churches. In the *Book of Armagh* it is recorded that Bishop Aed of Sléibte (*AU* †700) negotiated a deal with Bishop Segéne of Armagh (*AU* †686). This deal acknowledged that Armagh was the head of the *paruchia* of Patrick, which followed a pattern of forming federations between the different centres. Eventually the federation was strong enough that Tírechán was able to claim all the early churches for the Patrician federation (De Paor 1971: 100-105). Of course, De Paor rightly points out that it is possible that many of the claims

which Armagh made may well have been falsified or based in error and should therefore be treated with suspicion (De Paor 1971: 109-10).

Also crucial to the development of the Patrician federation was the paschal controversy. Of course, as early supporters of the older dating system, the Patrician Cult was on the losing side of this argument. However, Armagh came out of the argument significantly stronger than it had entered.⁵⁴ During the coarbship of Tomméne (*AU* †660-61), Rome was contacted and an appeal was made to papal authority. This was the result of a split between the *Romani* in the south, who supported Roman practice, and the *Hibernenses* based primarily in the north, who supported the Irish system (*HE* III.3). One episode that was well documented during this debate was the synod of Mag Léne, which was described in a letter from Cummian to Ségéne, abbot of Iona. The end result was that while the synod failed to reach an agreement, an envoy was sent to Rome (Sharpe 1994b: 65). In 630 this envoy from the Irish churches, lead by Cummian, was sent to Rome and celebrated Easter there in 631. This diplomatic envoy returned in 632 with relics of many of the principal martyrs, including, but not limited to, Peter, Paul, Lawrence, and Steven. These relics, which were placed in Armagh, would have appeared to give papal backing to the Patrician federation (Doherty 1984: 93). These relics also would have been a valuable source of income for Armagh, as they would have been useful both for attracting pilgrims and collecting taxes. It is worth noting that Sharpe entertains the possibility that these relics were faked by Armagh (1984b: 70). However, for our purposes, it only matters that these remains were perceived as real, and used to promote the interests of Armagh. However, in approximately 634 Pope Honorius

wrote a letter to the Irish urging conformity with the Roman Easter dating system (*HE* II.19). Such a letter may have hurt the ambitions of Armagh, unfortunately, we cannot know what the reaction was to the letter in Ireland.

In 640 the pope-elect, who would become John IV, wrote a letter addressing the Irish churches in the north urging conformity with Roman Easter dating and the elimination of the Pelagian heresy (*HE* II.19). In this letter the bishop of Armagh, Tomméne, is addressed first. Since he is the only bishop mentioned this might simply have been papal protocol; it would have been normal in most of Christendom for a bishop to be seen as superior to an abbot, especially since it may have been this bishop who initiated the contact with Rome. However, it may still have been perceived as papal sanction for Armagh (Sharpe 1984b: 66). Additionally, as a result of these contacts, Armagh became familiar with the concept of the arch-bishop, and used the papal authority to try to claim this level of jurisdiction for itself (Sharpe 1984b: 70). While Sharpe shows that this was largely unsuccessful, and that there was still confusion about which churches held the highest position, it seems likely that Armagh was now in a position in which many of the older churches and some of the newer churches recognised its authority (1984b: 66-69). Over the coming centuries, Armagh was able to use this eventually to become the primatial church of Ireland.

The two groups that seem to have remained a thorn in Armagh's side were Kildare and the Columban federation. Plagues in 698 to 700 weakened the Patrician federation and several of the monasteries were wiped out or nearly so and were subsequently taken over by the heirs to Columba who were not touched by the plague

⁵⁴ What follows is a summary of Sharpe (1984b: 65-66).

(Ó Cróinín 1995: 160; *VC* II.46). Herbert argues, unfortunately without referring to a primary source, or even another secondary source, that many of the take-overs in the seventh century seem to have had the backing of the Uí Néill (1996b: 54). On the whole however, it seems likely that the Columban federation did not recognise the primacy of Armagh. Indeed, it might not have needed to do so as the main area of Iona's influence, albeit strong amongst the Uí Néill due to the ancestry of their founder, seems to have been placed among the Picts and the Gaels in modern Scotland as well as in Northumbria (Herbert 1996b: 55).

Recently, Thomas Charles-Edwards has also shown that Armagh's conformity to the Roman side of the Paschal controversy would have limited any claims that the Columban churches may have had to Armagh's territory on the grounds of Armagh being a heretical or non-conformist church (Charles-Edwards 2000: 438). Of course, one of the most important relationships that emerged in the early church in Ireland, especially as far as the present discussion is concerned is that of the relationship between Armagh and Kildare. However, the nature of this discussion has important relevance to the hagiographical texts that we are discussing, and will therefore be dealt with in a later chapter which deals with the relationship between Brigit and Patrick.

Chapter 6

The Texts

There are three early Brigidine *vitae* that will be used as our main sources for this study. The *Vita II*, a Latin *vita* written by Cogitosus, which consists of thirty stories and seems to have as its purpose the aggrandisement of Kildare. Over sixty copies of this text survive, all in continental manuscripts (McCone 182: 108, Sharpe 1982: 82). The *Vita I*, written by an anonymous author, appears to be a collation of various earlier *vitae* dating possibly from the seventh century, but more likely from the eighth or ninth (Sharpe 1991: 15, McCone 1982: 135-36). There are approximately twenty-five copies of the *Vita I*, all surviving in continental manuscripts, with over eighty manuscripts containing either sections or recast versions (Sharpe 1982: 82). At the current time there is no published edition of the Latin *Vita I* more recent than the *Acta Sanctorum*, published by the Bollandists in 1658 (Connolly 1987: 5), although Seán Connolly's unpublished Ph.D. thesis provides a more recent edition (1970). The *Vita II* was most recently edited by Migne (*PL* 72). Finally, there is the *Bethu Brigitte*, from the late eighth or early ninth centuries, edited and translated by Donncha Ó hAodha (1978), which is roughly three quarters in Old Irish and the remainder in Latin (McCone 1982: 108). This text survives only in the *Rawlinson B. 512* manuscript (Ó hAodha 1978: ix). As we shall see, this bilingual text has much in common with the *Vita I* and may have shared a common source.

To begin with, we shall look at the chronology of the *Vita I* in relation to the *Vita II*. The earliest scholar to tackle this question was Mario Esposito. Although Esposito originally viewed the *Vita II* as the earlier of the two texts as well as a source for the *Vita I*,⁵⁵ he later revised and reversed this view after a closer reading of the two *vitae*. Esposito's arguments are based largely on the quality of the Latin in the *vitae*, which, as many authors comment upon, is significantly better in the *Vita II* (1930: 256; 1935: 319, McCone 1982: 124-5, et al.). He also argues that because of the thirty miracles in the *Vita II*, at least twenty-one are in the *Vita I*, often in an abbreviated form, indicating that the *Vita II* precedes the *Vita I*. McCone argues that as many as twenty-nine of the miracles in the *Vita II* are to be found in *Vita I*. He bases this upon a system of correspondence where not only direct verbatim sharing, and miracles where there are minor circumstantial differences are included as a correspondence, but also miracles where it is not clear whether there is any dependence, but there may well be some (McCone 1982: 127-28). Connolly has listed a useful correspondence; the bracketed numbers refer to the *Vita II*: '§14[=3]; §16[=1]; §19-§20[=2]; §30[=27]; §45[=16]; §50[=17]; §51[=15]; §67[=22]; §91[=6]; §98-99[=4-5]; §100[=11]; §101-§104[=7-10]; §105[=3]; §105-§106[=13-14]; §107[=18]; §108[=23]; §109-§110[=25-26]; §111[=28]; §122[=24]; §123[=12]; §124[=21]; §125[=20]; §126[=19]; §127-§128[=29-30].' (1989: 7) Connolly also correctly points out that these numbers are extremely tenuous as some of the links are questionable, such as in §19-§20[=2], where Cogitosus devotes roughly half a sentence to a story which is rather lengthy in the *Vita I* (Connolly 1989: 7). While many of some of these commonly shared sections are verbatim, Esposito believed

⁵⁵ For a fuller reading of his earlier view see Esposito (1912: 307-26).

that there are areas where the *Vita II* improves upon the *Vita I*, which he claims would seem to indicate that the *Vita II* is using the *Vita I* as a source (Esposito 1935: 135-6). Esposito also argues that many of the more unusual aspects of the *Vita I* are toned down or eliminated by the author of the *Vita II*, such as the birth tales and pagan ancestry and druidic upbringing of Brigit (1935: 134). He takes this as an indication that *Vita II* is a later development than *Vita I*.⁵⁶

The other major argument for believing the priority of the *Vita I* over the *Vita II* comes from Richard Sharpe. Sharpe sees the *Vita I* as a greater literary achievement than the *Vita II*. As he put it: 'It is ... a carefully judged balance of the high-flown and the humble, sometimes rhetorical, sometimes simple but never merely plain' (1982: 82). Sharpe concludes that the *Vita II* descends from the *Vita I*, which in turn descends from a primitive *vita* (1982: 105-06). Much of his argument revolves around the style and quality of the Latin in the *vitae*. To begin with, both the *Vita I* and the *Vita II* use brief colophons to introduce each miracle. The *Vita I* uses very short and formulaic openings, whereas Cogitosus wrote highly elaborate openings. Sharpe argues that Cogitosus would have elaborated upon the original opening rather than the author of the *Vita I* choosing to condense only one section of the miracles and not the entirety of every single miracle (1982: 90).

The *Vita II* also seems to clarify the *Vita I*. To use Sharpe's examples, in comparing §18 in the *Vita II* with §107 in the *Vita I* Sharpe notices several areas where the *Vita II* seems to improve upon the *Vita I*. These include; *suas cernens sues* in favour of *suas sues cernens* in the *Vita I*; the inclusion by Cogitosus of an *et* between *ferus* and *singularis* to turn a confusing string of adjectives into a set of

⁵⁶ For further elaboration upon the view that the *Vita I* precedes the *Vita II* see Howlett (1998: 1-23).

more balanced phrases; and finally the inclusion of the participles *concitus* and *uentum* to help some statements in the *Vita I* (1982: 90).⁵⁷ Sharpe argues that these improvements to the Latin only make sense if Cogitosus was looking at the *Vita I*, since it would not be likely for the author of the *Vita I* to lower the quality of the grammar of the text he was copying. Additionally, in certain areas, Cogitosus includes greater detail to the tales even if it is no real improvement to the substance of the *Vita I*, which indicates later development (Sharpe 1982: 91). Sharpe takes it as a matter of policy that the tendency of *Vita I* not to include minor details indicates that it is the primary text, whereas these features in the *Vita II* indicates that it is a later composition (1982: 95).

Sharpe also responds to Ó hAodha's criticism of Esposito when Dr. Ó hAodha shows that a section of the *Vita II* (§22 - §30, with the exception of §27) is fuller than the corresponding section of the *Vita I* and this would imply that the *Vita I* was not the source for *Vita II*. Sharpe rightly defends Esposito on this matter by pointing out that Esposito did not limit Cogitosus's sources to just the *Vita I*. Indeed, as we shall see, there are two known *vitae* that are unaccounted for, and are probably sources for all the various *vitae* (Sharpe 1982: 93). As will be shown, however, McCone has rethought the roles that the *vitae* play as a source for the extant lives.

The most recent scholar to argue that the *Vita I* precedes the *Vita II* has been Daniel McCarthy (2000). He argues that the *Iona Chronicle*, which may have been written by Columba, a near contemporary of Brigit, contains the most reliable account of the historical Brigit. Indeed, Herbert has pointed out that there is no reliable evidence for the dating of this text, and that it may well date from as early as

⁵⁷ For more details and examples see Sharpe (1982: 90-91).

Columba, but possibly it may date to as late as the second half of the seventh century (1996b: 22-23). McCarthy has based his argument on the fact that, aside from the supposed authorship of Columba, the relative chronology of major figures whom Brigit encounters are roughly the same in the Annals as in the *Vita I*. This of course, assumes that the order of appearance in the *vita* is meant to be read chronologically. We can see a section of McCarthy's list, which includes their first appearance in the *Vita I*, as well as their obit in the annals: Conall (§65, †480), Erc (§§69-72, †513), Conláed (§109, †577), Étchen (§111, †577), Íta (§121, †569). McCarthy argues that because the relative chronology is the same, but that the information contained in the annal about these figures is substantially different from what we are told in the hagiography, then the *Vita I*, like the *Iona Chronicles*, must date from a time when the historical Brigit was still a part of living memory (McCarthy 2000: 268-278). This argument seems to ignore a number of factors. First, as will be demonstrated shortly, McCone has shown that the *Vita I* seems to be a composite of different works from the seventh century. McCarthy has not considered the possibility that this relative chronology is the work of one of the earlier compilers. McCarthy has also not considered the possibility that the *Iona Chronicle* and the *Vita I* are working from a common source. Indeed, the authors of the *Vita I*, or the source material for the *Vita I*, may have been aware of the *Iona Chronicle* and used the dating system within, but chose to use other sources, such as oral literature, to create their stories. A similar observation about the Patrician biographers has been made by De Paor (1971: 103) and Ó Cróinín (2000: 210), who recognised that Muirchú and Tírechán were familiar with reliable accounts about Patrick, such as the *Confessio* and the

Epistola, but relied more on native accounts as their primary interest was not historical.

Many scholars, however, believe that the *Vita II* is possibly the oldest existing work of Irish hagiography in general and of course the oldest extant Brigidine *vita* (Bieler 1962: 246-7, Connolly 1987: 5; et al). The first author to express this view was Bieler who, without giving any clear example as to why, saw the Latin of the *Vita I* as being more archaic than the Latin of the *Vita II* (1962: 246). One of the points that Bieler recognised that would seem to oppose this chronology is that Muirchú in his *vita* of St. Patrick credits Cogitosus as being the first author to write a formal saint's *vita* (1962: 247). It is also worth noting that as a part of this acknowledgement Muirchú also refers to Cogitosus as being his father. While this may be literally true, it is more likely that this attribution may either refer to Cogitosus as being a spiritual father to Muirchú or simply as a term of respect, especially for one who blazed the trail in early Irish hagiography (Connolly 1987: 5).

Bieler argues that there were probably earlier *vitae* of both St. Patrick and St. Brigit but it was not until Muirchú and Cogitosus that the *vitae* had greater aspirations than just creating a text that was an odd collection of tales (1962: 245). Indeed, Cumméne seems to have compiled a similar collection of anecdotes about Columba (Herbert 1996b: 24-25). Bieler also believes that the *Vita I* and the *Vita II* share a common source. He argues that much of what is in the *Vita I* would not make sense if we did not have Cogitosus's expanded version of the miracles. It is almost as if the author expects us to have a familiarity with the writings of Cogitosus, therefore indicating that the *Vita II* is the older of the two sources. Bieler also argues that Cogitosus does not read as simply an expansion of the *Vita I*, unfortunately

without fully explaining why (1962: 246). What Bieler does conclude is that the *Vita I* and *II* both derive from a common *vita* and that the differences between the two sources stem from individual interpretations of that source. The more archaic Latin of the *Vita I* seems, according to Bieler, to come from the original common source. It should be pointed out Connolly agreed with this conclusion (1987: 5-10), but later retracts in favour of the primacy of the *Vita II* (Connolly 1989: 5-13).

While Bieler's argument is intriguing, he is only offering a brief summary and therefore does not detail many of his arguments in a way that is fully convincing. Those who believe that the *Vita I* is derived from the *Vita II* put forth a more convincing line of argument. Ó hAodha touches briefly upon the relationship between the Latin *vitae*. He sees the *Vita I* as more of a compilation than a complete and literary *vita* (1978: xvii). The sections which are shared with the *Vita II* seem to be more of an abbreviation in which the reader might be expected to be familiar with some of the sources (1978: xxii).⁵⁸

These arguments for an earlier *Vita II* are more fully fleshed out by Ó Briain, who lists four main objections to believing that the *Vita II* was the earlier text. First, the *Vita I* is more detailed in terms of place and personal names, which indicates a more mature development of the miracles (1978: 122). Secondly, often the *Vita I* seems to be abbreviating the *Vita II*; this is especially true for the sections from §97 onwards in the *Vita I*, where the tales would be indecipherable without the aid of the *Vita II* (1978: 122-23). Thirdly, Ó Briain asks why Cogitosus would have selected thirty miracles at random from a selection of one hundred and thirty, whereas it makes sense for the author of the *Vita I* to select most of the *Vita II* (1978: 123).

Finally, the *Vita II* has a level of homogeneity that is not present in the *Vita I* (1978: 123-24).

In addition to these four general points, Ó Briain also looks at some aspects of the *vitae* in more detail. One such aspect is the quality of the Latin in the *vitae*. The *Vita II*, although not composed in perfect Latin, is uniform and constant in its syntax and grammar (Ó Briain 1978: 126). The *Vita I* on the other hand, has no unity, often commits basic errors, and avoids using subjunctive and infinitive forms. (Ó Briain 1978: 127-78). However, there is much verbatim agreement between the *vitae*, and when this agreement occurs it is more consistent with the style of the *Vita II*; when they diverge, the *Vita I* often reverts to a less sophisticated style of writing (Ó Briain 1978: 127-28). Ó Briain also looks at the phenomenon of duplicate miracles in the *vitae*, which he sees as a mark of later development. This phenomenon does not occur in the *Vita II*, but does occur in the *Vita I* (1978: 128-29). An example of this occurs in numbers four and seven when balls of flame appear above Brigit's mother in her sleep.⁵⁹ It is also worth noting that while the *Vita II* is only interested in Leinster, the *Vita I* is a more national *vita*, which is taken to reflect the spread of her cult (Ó Briain 1978: 126).

Ó Briain's arguments for the relative dating of the texts are convincing, and it is these arguments that McCone uses as his basis for the dating of the texts (McCone 1982: 127). However, Ó Briain assumed that much of the *Vita I* was drawn from local tradition, which is why the author merely abbreviated the sections taken from the *Vita II*. It was not necessary to write them in full since they were already written.

⁵⁸ For more details see Ó hAodha (1978: xx-xxii).

⁵⁹ For further examples see Ó Briain (1978: 128-29).

It is on this issue that McCone diverges from Ó Briain. As mentioned above, the *Vita I* seems to be a compilation of various sources. McCone looks at the poem *Broccán's Hymn* which states that 'ar is e Ultán rochomthinóil ferta Brigitte ule.' (*Broccán's Hymn* 327: Introduction .6, McCone 1982: 114)⁶⁰ He also looked a poem which only survives in a facsimile (1935: 126), which McCone dates to the eighth or early ninth century and may be an introduction to a now lost metrical *vita* (1982: 114), and is worth quoting in full:

Adfore digneris precibus, pia virgo, benignis

Brigita, supplicibus prospera posce tuis.
 Si mihi vitae comes fuerit, haec certa tenebis
 Laudum te cumulis enituisse meis.
 Non minus Ultano nostrae praeconia laudis
 Praestabunt populis, o sacra virgo, piis.
 Ille fuit praesul magnus, virtutibus aptus.
 Hunc sequar et vincam, si mihi cedis opem.
 Sic Aileran, plura excerpisit qui gesta tuorum
 Atque operum flores scripsit opima tomis,
 Non praetermittam, si forte praeterit ille,
 Quamquam praesuleos scanderit ipse gradus.
 Nam Cogitosus item, si jus te iudice cedat,
 Et nostri studii funditus impar erit.
 Sed cur tam magnos praecellam munere patres?
 Quod solus pandam gesta beata trium,
 Et quod praecipui patres profamine prosae
 Ediderant, versu nunc modulabor ego.
 Jam coeptam, comitare viam famulumque tueri
 Digneris, superis apta puella choris;
 Et qui principiam facti concedere jussit,
 Perfectam faciat Christus habere finem,
 Non quod sim dignus peccator talia fari,
 Sed precor indignus dignus ut esse queam.
 (Esposito 1935: 126)⁶¹

⁶⁰ For it is Ultán who gathered all of Brigit's miracles.

⁶¹ May you see fit, blessed virgin, to assist friendly prayers: Brigit, ask good fortune for your suppliants. If life stays with me, you will have this certainty of having shone forth through my heaps of praises. No less than Ultán shall the proclamations of our praise stand out for pious peoples, O holy virgin. He was the great leader of the way, endowed with virtues; him I will follow and outstrip, if you grant me help. Likewise I will not let Ailerán slip by, who selected many splendid deeds and wrote about the flower of your works in books, if he slips by perchance, even though he should himself have

This poem indicates that there were three written Brigidine *vitae* written by Ultán of Ardraccan (*AU* †656-57), Ailerán of Clonard (*AU* † 665), and Cogitosus (1982: 114). Esposito views the *Vita I* as the work of Ailerán. This is based on a premise that the *Vita I* is older than the *Vita II*. The *Vita I* and the *Bethu Brigitte* both come from a common source. He believes the common source to be written by Ultán, leaving Ailerán as the author of the *Vita I*. (1935: 140)

McCone then divides the *Vita I* into three sections, which he labels **A** (§§ 1-43 and *Bethu Brigitte*), **B** (§§ 44-97 and §§ 113-122) and those miracles which can be traced from the *Vita II*. **A** section is mostly concerned with Mide and Tethba, which was roughly the area of Uí Chairbre dominance in the sixth century before a period of decline in the seventh century left them with only the kingdoms around Granard and Clonard. This would seem well suited to the interests of Ailerán (McCone 1982: 134). Furthermore, the indication of classical learning in the **A** section seems to conform to Ailerán's style of writing (McCone 1982: 135). **B** section shows Brigit assisting Conall Cremthainne against Cairbre, his brother. This probably would have suited Ultán, who lived in the territory of the Síol nÁedo Sláine, a dynastic group that was traditionally associated with Conall's dynasty (McCone 1982: 135). The poem itself is a preface for a metrical *vita* of Brigit that does not exist. It seems to assume that it will be drawing together the three *vitae* by these three authors. If one were derived from another there would be no need to blend them together. This indicates

climbed the steps ahead. For Cogitosus besides, if justice by your judgement allow, will also be absolutely no match for our zeal. But why shall I surpass such great predecessors (*patres*. [cf. Muirchú's usage earlier]) in performance? Because I alone will expound the blessed acts of the three, and will modulate in verse what distinguished predecessors (*praecipui patres*) narrated in the utterance of prose. (Translated in McCone 1982: 114-15).

that each *vita* has its own contributions and are not merely derivative of each other (McCone 1982: 117).

We have so far seen that the *Vita I* is drawn together from previously existing written sources, probably those written by Ultán, Ailerán, and Cogitosus. This would mean that the oldest surviving Latin Brigidine text is the *Vita II*. We still have not asked what is the relationship of the bi-lingual *Bethu Brigte* to the Latin *vitae*. The *Bethu Brigte* dates mostly, on linguistic grounds, from the ninth century, but there is a significant stratum of eighth century forms, which would place it in the late eighth or early ninth century (Ó hAodha 1978: xix). As we shall see, both the *Vita I* and the *Bethu Brigte* are remarkably similar in the commonly shared sections of the two *vitae*. Of course, some due allowance must be made for the fact that the leaf containing the first four tales of the *Bethu Brigte* is missing in the *Rawlinson B.512* manuscript. We can reasonably assume that the missing sections would correspond roughly to the missing sections in the *Vita I* due to the close parallels in the remaining miracles in the *Bethu Brigte* with corresponding miracles in the *Vita I*.

It is possible that the *Bethu Brigte* began as an interlinear gloss of an earlier text (Ó hAodha 1978: xix). However, bi-lingual *vitae* were not uncommon, and it is just as possible that it was an original composition (Esposito 1935: 137-8). Unfortunately, the most recent edition by Ó hAodha entertains both possibilities, but is non-committal on this subject (1978: xix). Often, the oscillations between the languages in the text seem somewhat arbitrary, such as when entire miracles are written in Latin, or when Irish sentences include a few random Latin words. At other times it seems rather intentional such as when Brigit declares “Meum erit hoc, meum erit hoc.” (*Bethu Brigte* §4, *Vita I* §11) or when the cleric says to Ibor “Haec

est Maria quae inter vos habitat.”(*Bethu Brigte* §11, *Vita I* §15) At times the Latin of the *Bethu Brigte* reveals classical training, possibly indicative of the classical training revealed in other texts by Ailerán. At other times the Latin seems to be clumsily organised. These differences in the use and quality of Latin leads McCone to conclude that the *Bethu Brigte* was based upon a *vita* which itself was based on a *vita* by Ailerán. This *vita* preserved much of the high quality Latin of Ailerán however it also had a corrupting effect on the text (1982: 124-25).

The relationship between the *Bethu Brigte* and the *Vita I* is immediate and obvious. The opening four miracles are missing in the *Bethu Brigte* due to a missing page. In the existing text, §1-§46 are found in roughly the same order with the same geographical framework as the *Vita I* (McCone 1982: 111). However, it is unlikely that the *Bethu Brigte* derived from the *Vita I* since the *Bethu Brigte* has a greater number of personal and place names which may indicate simply that there was a common source to which the *Bethu Brigte* has remained more faithful (Ó hAodha 1978: xvii). Furthermore, the *Bethu Brigte* ends suddenly, leaving the reader with the impression that it is not a complete narrative (Sharpe 1982: 93, Ó hAodha 1978: xix). However, §46 concludes with two verses in the *debide* style and there is a clearly stated ‘Finit’ in the manuscript, indicating that at least the scribe who penned the surviving version believed it to be a complete edition (McCone 1982: 121). Furthermore, the *Bethu Brigte* is more concerned with Mide and Tethba, and corresponds with the section labelled A, which would indicate that its source was Ailerán (McCone 1982: 134-35). All this evidence put forth indicates that the *Bethu Brigte* is a closely related but independent composition from the *Vita I*, both of which are derived from a common source.

While we have shown that the *Vita I* is drawn from several sources, including the *Vita II*, which is possibly an original composition, and that the *Bethu Brigitte* shares a common source with the *Vita I*, we have yet to establish the dates of these texts. As mentioned above, the language of the *Bethu Brigitte* mostly dates from the eighth and ninth centuries, indicating that the text itself probably dates from around this time. We can also establish the latest dates during which the Latin *Vitae* could have been written. Muirchú wrote roughly c. 680 –700 CE. His mention of Cogitosus as ‘Pater Meus’ in his introduction would indicate that Cogitosus was more senior than Muirchú. It also allows us to reasonably conclude that the *Vita II* predates Muirchú’s *vita* of Patrick and probably dates to the mid-seventh century. Hughes specifically dates the text to the 630’s, however, McCone points out that Cogitosus wrote later than Ultán and Ailerán, which would date the text to the later mid-seventh century (Hughes 1972: 227, McCone 1982: 133). As regards the evolution of the *Vita I*, a scribe writing in Germany around the mid-ninth century seems to have penned the oldest extant copy. By this point, the text has already become corrupted, which indicates that it may have been through several transmissions. McCone estimates that the *Vita I* was then written in the late eighth or early ninth centuries. More likely it was the late eighth century, as placing the text in the early ninth century would not allow much time for the text to have become corrupted (McCone 1982: 117).

To summarise our conclusions briefly then, we have shown that the *Vita II* was written by Cogitosus in the mid seventh century. This text was one of the sources used by the anonymous author of the *Vita I* in the late eighth or early ninth centuries. Additionally, whether by an interlinear gloss or by a unique reworking of

Ailerán's text, the *Bethu Brigitte* came into existence in approximately the early ninth century. As we shall see, the time of the writing of these texts affects their content.

Section 2

Chapter 1

Signs of Greatness

Introduction

The story of the childhood of Brigit is one of the most important aspects of our texts to understand. As we have seen, many saints are born into their holy position; divinely elected to act as a conduit between earth and the heavens. While this is not the only way in which the sanctified come to be saints, it is certainly a common one. Brigit is one saint who from an early age had been chosen by God to be especially holy amongst living people. The aim of this chapter is to understand how this calling is manifested in the *vitae*, especially the *Vita I*, where the entire story of her youth is told, and the *Bethu Brigitte*, where, unfortunately, the first few sections have been lost.

Brigit's biographers, like the biographers of so many saints, wrote the *vitae* in such a way that the saint would have a life that conformed to the heroic biography. As we shall see, according to her biographers, Brigit's greatness was prophesied, she was born under miraculous circumstances, and she lived a life that conforms broadly to the archetypal biography of so many other saints as well as other international heroes. From there particular aspects of the biography will be examined, starting with the fact that her future greatness was predicted before and shortly after birth, both by druids and by Christian priests. This effectively showed her as a conduit not only between Heaven and Earth, but also between pagans and Christians. Indeed, there is a heavy focus in the following chapter on Brigit's liminal aspects due to the

fact that her liminal nature was heavily emphasised in accounts of her childhood. We have seen that saints are generally regarded as liminal figures. Such was the case with our saint. Brigit's liminality is emphasised, not only in her dealings with both the Christian other world and with the social world of pagans and druids, but also in the manner of her birth. She was born with her mother straddling a threshold at dawn while holding a bowl of warm milk. This act symbolically allowed Brigit to operate between the different worlds and become a mistress of both.

One of these worlds that Brigit belonged to was the world of the druid. While by no means a druid or pagan herself, Brigit did have strong links to the druidic world as a child. Her destiny was foreseen by a druid who later came to own Brigit's mother and who played a crucial role in Brigit's upbringing and spiritual development as a child. At one point, it is the druid who saves the girl from his Christian uncle who is upset about a prophecy that the infant girl will have a large *paruchia* in Connacht. Such pagan links have strong biblical precedents: notably in the figure of Moses, who was raised by Pharaoh's daughter, although nursed by a Hebrew woman (Exo. 2: 1-10).

Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion on the role of fire in the Brigidine texts. As we shall see, in the Bible, when divine grace is shown in a physical manifestation, the symbol is often a fire that does not harm the object that is being burnt. Building upon the theories of Lévi-Strauss (1970), I will argue that the numerous examples of the infant being on fire yet not being harmed, is in effect a process of "cooking" her. In other words, Brigit is being transformed and brought from a state of original sin into one of Christian purity and holiness. Indeed, such a transformation could be argued to symbolise Brigit's very nature. Brigit was born

into a world that was not yet fully Christian and where priests may not have been available to baptise her. Of course, it should be noted that by avoiding naming any particular Christian person who baptised her, the Brigidine authors would also have avoided the problem of any other saint claiming authority over Brigit and her *paruchia*. While the druid who raised the child dreams of Brigit being baptised, it is the miraculous fire that transforms and cleanses the chosen infant into a holy saint.

The Heroic Biography

One crucial and widely discussed aspect of the early Brigidine tradition is her heroic biography. It was Nora Chadwick who first realised that the saint replaced the hero in the popular literature when the new faith arrived (1960: 1-6). However, the question as to whether or not the figure of the saint conformed to the heroic biography was not dealt with until more recently. The formula itself was first recognised by Von Hahn in his work *Sagwissenschaftliche Studien* (1871-1876). In this work, Von Hahn developed the theory of the Aryan Expulsion-and-Return Formula. Although this work was not widely received at first, it did eventually become one of the most important aspects of folklore and mythology studies. This was largely due to Otto Rank who examined this formula and applied it to tales outside of the Indo-European world, thus making it a product of universal human psychology rather than the concerns of a particular group of people (1914). By including Moses and Christ in his studies, Rank opened the biography of the hero to

scholars such as Lord Raglan (1936), Campbell (1949) and De Vries (1959).⁶² These theories were to have a tremendous impact on studies of the Celtic heroes. While each of these scholars have taken their own views on the subject, Ó Cathasaigh has pointed out that the main concern with all of them is rites of passage and life crises that the hero must endure (1977: 22).

The first scholarly attempt at examination of the saints as heroes was done by Alwyn Rees (1936). However, he was predominately concerned with the saint as a ritual figure. More useful might be Ó Cathasaigh's study of Cormac mac Airt, and how the heroic biography can be used to apply to a peaceful character. Ó Cathasaigh used the biography laid out by de Vries, who was, like Rees, concerned with seeing the hero as a ritual or symbolic figure (1977: 4). However, the model that he constructed was concerned with identifying the way in which the hero was segregated from the rest of the community. Ó Cathasaigh, using the topic headings, gives a brief listing of the motifs that de Vries describes:

- I.* The Begetting of the hero.
- II.* The Birth of the hero.
- III.* The youth of the hero is threatened.
- IV.* The way in which the hero is brought up.
- V.* The hero often acquires invulnerability.
- VI.* The fight with a dragon or other monster.
- VII.* The hero wins a maiden, usually after overcoming great dangers
- VIII.* The hero makes an expedition to the otherworld.

⁶² This paragraph is mostly a summary of Ó Cathasaigh (1977: 1-8). See op. cit. for a more detailed analysis.

IX. When the hero is banished in his youth he returns later and is victorious over his enemies. In some cases he has to leave the realm again which he has won with such difficulty.

X. The death of the hero.

(Ó Cathasaigh 1977: 6, de Vries 1959: 210-16)

De Vries goes on to list different variants of each theme listed above. For example, with number III, *The youth of the hero is threatened*, which could be more accurately described as 'the life of the young hero is threatened' he lists the three stages of how this process happens:

A. The child is exposed

B. The child is fed by animals

C. The child is then found by shepherds, or some other humble worker, or brought to them.

(deVries 1959: 212-214)

If appropriate, these themes are then given further categories. For instance, de Vries lists ten common animals that help to raise the hero, such as a doe, she-wolf, mare or cow.

Ó Cathasaigh noted that this method of categorisation 'avoids the rigid formulations of von Hahn, Rank, and Raglan on the one hand, and the over-generalised 'mono-myth' of Joseph Campbell on the other (1977: 6). While Ó Cathasaigh capitalised on the culturally flexible nature of de Vries' work to define the heroic biography of a peaceful Irish king. He nevertheless allowed for the broadest possible formulation of birth, dynamic youth, foreign service, and the return of the hero as the basic constituents of the formula (Ó Cathasaigh 1977: 4). Ó Cathasaigh also pointed out that there were problems with this formulation. First, it did not clarify how the origins of the heroic biography emerged, in other words it was

the result of a unique story whose template spread as versions of the story were told, or was the product of universal human psychology. This is quite a significant problem in Celtic studies, as seemingly native heroes often have remarkably similar aspects to both Christian and Classical figures. Secondly, as it focuses on transitional moments in a person's life, this biography can easily correspond to a real human life story (1977: 4-6). However, even if this were the case, the appeal of the story could still lie in the correlation with the more universal biography.

Bray has narrowed it even more so that it might be applied to the *vitae* of early Irish saints (1986). Bray's pattern, which is worth quoting verbatim, is as follows:

1. The saint, like the hero, is conceived in an unusual or unnatural way. His parents are often of royal or noble birth and there are prophecies and omens concerning his advent.
2. The birth of the saint takes place in an unusual manner, often accompanied by heavenly phenomena.
3. In his youth, he is sent to another holy man to be educated; he displays his miraculous powers and other signs of sanctity at an early age.
4. The saint leaves his teacher; he makes a pilgrimage; he spends some time in wilderness as a hermit and practices a severe regime of asceticism.
5. The saint founds a monastery or church, and attracts disciples.
6. He performs many miracles, mostly of healing, and tends to the needs of the community.
7. The saint engages in conflict with supernatural forces (eg. monsters) but most often with secular or pagan powers (eg. the local ruler or pagan priest-magician).
8. The saint speaks with angels, is afforded a vision of heaven or the Promised Land, or has some direct communion with God.

9. The saint foresees the time of his death and prepares for it.
10. The death of the saint usually occurs after a long life, but like the hero's, it is miraculous; afterwards miracles occur at his tomb and through his relics.
(Bray 1986: 267)

In addition to this list, she recognised other important aspects of the heroic saint, for instance, while the martial hero is often born to, or more frequently begotten by, an otherworld figure, such an event is, with the exception of the conception of Christ himself, simply not possible in a Christian context. Instead, the saint is born of regular humans, even if the coupling is irregular, as in the case of Brigit, who was the product of a noble father and a slave mother. Despite their worldly origins, the hagiographers consistently depict the saints as continuously attempting to break their worldly ties to focus on heaven (1986: 264). Of course, the hero does not need to conform to every point of the saintly heroic biography listed by Bray. Indeed, some saintly biographies might have only a very limited number of aspects of the heroic biography.

As we shall see, the *Vita I* and *Bethu Brigitte* conform to many of the points within this model, although sometimes the fit between the saint and Bray's model is only possible in the broadest possible terms. Additionally, Brigit has a unique method of dealing with conflicts with secular and pagan powers. Specifically, she uses the social system of potlatch to gain the upper hand against her adversaries, a topic that will be dealt with in a later chapter. Within the *Vita II Cogitosus* selected only a limited number of motifs; in particular he ignored the birth and youth of saint Brigit. Probably this decision not to include these aspects of the biography was the

result of a biographer, namely Cogitosus, whose aims went beyond simply glorifying the saint, and was instead concerned with benefiting Kildare.

Before we begin analysing the lives of the saint, we must first consider a number of points that Boyer has made about saints in general. First, he argues that time and place are generally vague in the *vitae* of the saints (Boyer 1980: 29-29). While this is generally true for Irish hagiography as regards time, other sources, such as the annals and chronicles, give exact dates. Unfortunately, we are rarely given more than a birth date and an obit, and often there is a great deal of disparity between the different texts. However, the same cannot be said for place in Irish hagiography. Indeed, due to the agenda of the authors, there is a great emphasis on location in the lives, probably due to the emphasis on competing claims made by the monasteries. Additionally, he points out that we usually do not have a good physical image of the saint, possibly because our authors sought to emphasise the less physical aspects of the saint (Boyer 1980: 30). This is certainly true for Brigit, who is described as having beautiful eyes that could fetch a high bride price (*Bethu Brigitte* §15). However, that is the only physical description that we have of our saint

With those cautions in mind, we should briefly see where the different Brigidine miracles fall within the key points of Bray's framework for the saintly heroic biography. We will begin by looking at the *Vita I* and the *Bethu Brigitte*. The first motif, the conception of the saint and prophecies of her greatness is only to be found in the *Vita I* §§ 1-5. The same can be said of the birth of the hero, which is to be found in §6. It is quite probable that the *Bethu Brigitte* once contained these sections, but that they have since been lost with the missing folios. Brigit's mother was sent off with a druid before she had given birth to the girl. Under the care of the

druid Brigit displayed remarkable holiness as a child, resulting in suckling on a white cow with red ears rather than eating the impure food of the druid (*Vita I* §§7-11 *Bethu Brigitte* §§1-6). Bray has recently argued that this unusually coloured cow, once a symbol of the pagan otherworld, has become a heavenly cow in the hagiography. Its dispersal of pure heavenly milk, is symbolic of the milk of salvation offered in the new faith (2000: 295-96). In some ways the druid can be considered to be a teacher; he recognises her nature, and guides her towards an appropriate path. This is especially true in the *Vita I*, where in §§11-13 the druid stayed with Brigit during her fosterage. Indeed, he is the one who inexplicably realises that she needs a Christian upbringing. This is in spite of the fact that he was a druid and therefore a pagan. However, a more obvious example of this, and thus Bray's third motif, is her Christian foster mother (*Vita I* §§11-13; *Bethu Brigitte* §7-8). This period of our saint's life is given only brief mention in the texts. However, it is a necessary element if our saint is to be fully established as a Christian. The fourth motif seems to occur when Brigit leaves the Christian woman who has fostered her. It should be noted that this is not the rigid asceticism associated with the saint leaving the teacher in Bray's biographical pattern. It loosely conforms on the grounds that the saint has left her teacher, if indeed, her druid owner can be defined as such. However, rather than wandering in the wilderness, she, in a more typical example of the international heroic biography, returns home. The pilgrimage continues when she returns to her father, once there, she regularly gives her father's goods to the poor, the entire fourth motif, namely leaving the teacher to go on pilgrimage or to live as an ascetic, is in *Vita I* §§11-19 and *Bethu Brigitte* §§7-16, although these miracles are often accompanied with signs and portents of her future greatness. Finally, after being

consecrated as a nun, Brigit establishes a foundation. In *Bethu Brigitte* §20, her first foundation is at Ached hÍ in Saltus Avis (Co. West Meath), while in *Vita I* §20, her first foundation is in Mide in the territory of the Uí Néill. Unfortunately, the text does not give a more precise location. The remainder of the two texts deals with Brigit's miracles and encounter with secular or pagan powers thus including sections six and seven of Bray's pattern. Brigit is not given any encounters with God or heaven, although there are numerous accounts of her encountering secular and powers and otherworldly figures. However, surprisingly for a saint, there is only a brief description of her death in the *Vita I* (§129).

The *Vita II* approaches Brigit in a different manner from the other texts. Most of the text is simply concerned with the miracles that Brigit performed. Other aspects of the biography are simply glossed over. For example, the foundation of her monastery and the followers that gathered around her are briefly mentioned in the preface, and §31 simply mentions that Brigit has indeed died. However, the two final chapters (§§31-32) are concerned with the posthumous miracles at Kildare and the grandness of the monastery there. It should be noted that these two chapters are about one fifth of the life as a whole. To this can be added Cogitosus's lengthy preface, which is also primarily concerned with Kildare. Such a heavy emphasis on the monastery rather than the saint indicates that Cogitosus, although including elements of the heroic biography, was fundamentally interested in promoting Kildare.

We have seen that the heroic biography of Brigit conforms to that of other Irish saints. While this universal approach helps to give a broad stylised account of what is happening in the lives of the saints, it does not allow the saints to be seen and examined as individual personas. The only way to achieve this is to closely examine

the individual texts. Such close examination allows us see how the saints behave, what makes them unique, how the biographer is using symbols, and what made the saint appealing to the audience at the time

Prophecies of Greatness

We have seen that the holiness of saints being foreseen from childhood or even before then is a common motif in hagiographic, as well as heroic, literature. It reinforces the idea that the greatness of the figure is beyond just coincidence, and therefore serves a greater purpose. The greatness of the hero is obvious before maturity or even birth to those who have access to greater knowledge than the ordinary lay person, especially other Christian figures, or in the case of Ireland, druids. The response by others, sometimes even the parents, to the greatness of the newly born child, may be positive acceptance, or jealous hatred, but it clearly establishes that the child is exceptional. This exceptional nature is true even when the child is at first a terrible and badly behaved child. Although seemingly as far from the Christian ideal as possible, the child will still show signs of being different. The child's greatness is not just happenstance, it is something ordained and pre-figured, indicating a greater degree of divine favour for the hero to be. However, it must be remembered, that while the child might be pre-destined to greatness, it still has to take the necessary steps to get there.

Before she is born, the holiness of Brigit is foretold by a number of figures who foresee and eagerly await her greatness. In §2 of the *Vita I*, Dubthach and Bróicsech are riding in a chariot. When a druid hears the sound of the chariot

coming he believes that it is a king approaching. When he sends out his servants, they inform the druid that it is only Dubthach who was coming. The druid quickly learns that Bróicsech is pregnant with the child of Dubthach. He informs the nobleman that the daughter she is carrying will achieve greatness far beyond that of any of his sons. Bróicsech is informed that the child will one day be the agent of her freedom, and the child will protect the slave woman so that no one can harm her. Dubthach is pleased with this, but as a result of this prophecy, his sons and wife redouble their efforts to get him to sell the slave. A similar episode can be seen in the birth story of Níall of the Nine Hostages. In this story, Mongfind terrorised Cairenn when she was pregnant with Níall, resulting in Cairenn leaving Níall on the Green of Tara when he was born. Fortunately for Níall, his future greatness was recognised by the poet Torna, who raised him to be king. Even after Níall returned to his home, Mongfind continued to try to prevent Niall from ascending to the kingship (*The Adventure of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedón* §§ 1-6).

In the next episode Bishops Mel and Melchú from Britain arrive, and tell Dubthach's melancholy wife, saddened by the predictions that her bondmaid's child will exceed both herself and all of her sons to be cheerful:

Illis autem diebus Deo instigante duo sancti episcopi ex Precannia uenientes intrauerunt domum Dubthachi, quorum unus uocabatur Mel et alter Melchu. Dixit Mel ad uxorem Dubthachi: 'Quare tristis es? Partus famulae tuae praecelet te et semen tuum. Sed tamen ancillam sicut filios tuos ama, quia progenies illius tuo semini multum proficiet.'
(*Vita I*: 2. 13-19)⁶³

⁶³ In those days, at God's instigation, two holy bishops from Britain came. And they went into the house of Dubthach. One of whom was called Mel and the other Melchú. Mel said to the wife of Dubthach: 'Why are you sad? The child of your slave woman will excel you and your offspring. But nevertheless, love the bondmaid the same as your sons because her progeny will greatly benefit your sons'. [§3]

In spite of these predictions, and his own joy at having a daughter, Dubthach sold the woman to a poet. However, he did not sell off the child in the womb:

Cum ergo uxor perduraret in furore, uenit quidam poeta de nepotibus Neil Deo inspiratus, et emit ancillam Dubthachi; sed tamen ille non uendidit partum quam habebat illa in utero.
(*Vita I*: 2. 19-23)⁶⁴

The poet then sold the bondmaid to a druid (*Vita I* §5). In §6 this druid then hosted a party for his king and queen, who was also pregnant at the time. When they asked a prophet who was there, he informed them that if her child were to be born at daybreak the following morning, it would have no equal on Earth:

Tunc amici et serui regis interrogabant quendam prophetam qua hora oportebat reginam prolem parere. Magus dixit: 'Si die crastino orto sole nasceretur, neminem in terris haberet equalem.'
(*Vita I*: 3.5-8)⁶⁵

Unfortunately for the queen, she gives birth too early. Bróicsech, on the other hand, gives birth to Brigit at the right moment:

Mane autem facto et orto sole, uenit ancilla magi ad domum, portans uas plenum lacte nuper emulso; et cum posuisset unum pedem trans limen domus et alterum pedem foris, cecidit super limen sedens et genuit filiam. Sic enim dixit propheta quod nec in domo nec extra domum ista ancilla pareret; et de lacte illo calido quod portabat corpus infantis mundatus est.
(*Vita I*: 3.9-15)⁶⁶

While we have established that Brigit has, in her own way, been conceived, brought to term, and born in a manner typical of the hero, she still needs to be born

⁶⁴ When, therefore, the wife continued in her anger, there came a poet of the Uí Néill at God's inspiration, and bought Dubthach's slave girl; but nevertheless, he did not sell the offspring that she was keeping in her womb. [§4]

⁶⁵ Then friends and servants of the king were asking a certain prophet at what hour the queen should give birth. The druid said, 'If it were born tomorrow at dawn, it would have no equal on Earth.' [§6]

⁶⁶ When the morning arrived and the sun rose the bondmaid of the druid came to the house carrying with her a vessel of freshly milked milk, and when she had placed one foot across the threshold of the house and the other foot was outside she fell above the threshold into a sitting position and gave birth to a daughter. This was how the prophet said that the slave woman would give birth: neither inside a

into the Christian faith and destiny for which she is meant. In other words, she needs to be baptised. However, since she has been born before the coming of Patrick, there are no priests available to baptise her. Instead, the baptism occurs in a miraculous fashion. First, in *Vita I* §7, the house that the infant Brigit is staying in seems to be on fire when it is not. Then in §8, a cloth touching her head seems to be on fire.⁶⁷ Immediately following this, the druid dreams that the child is being baptised by two Christian priests, thus bringing Brigit fully into the Christian world, where her remarkable abilities can come to full fruition.

Her acts in this world begin when she predicts that Connacht will become part of her paruchia. The importance of this miracle makes it worth repeating in full:

Fecht n-ale a mbaí in drui 7 brathair a mathar hi tig 7 an ingen ina cotluth, cia port i mbai a mathair, co cualatar guth in bec ina hingini hi leith in tigi, 7 ni ragab-si labrath cidacht.

‘Deci du(i)n’, ar an druí fria muntir, ‘ci[n]das ro[nd]-gab ar n-ingen, ar ni lamur-sa fo bith nida Christadi’.

Conda-acca[e] inna crois-[f]igil (hi) hi ligiu os si oc irnagthi.

‘Airg aither[r]uch’, ar in drui, ‘7 iarfaig ní di indossa, ar at-bera ni frit nunc’.

‘Te[i]t-side 7 ata-gladustar:

‘Epir ni frim, a ingen’, olse.

As-bert iarum ind ingen da focul fris:

‘Meum erit hoc, meum erit hoc’.

Ni tuc dano amnair in druad a n-í-sin.

‘Rel dun’, ol sude frisin drúid, ‘ar ní tucaim-si’.

‘Nípu failteu de em’, ol in drui. ‘Is ed em at-rubart’, ol in drui, ‘bid lee in mennut-sa co laa mbratha’.

Fa-indel avunculus magi Brigitam tenere plepem. As-bert in drui: ‘Vere implebitur. Ipsius erit hic campus, licet exeat mecum ad Mumenenses.

(*Bethu Brigitte* §4)⁶⁸

house nor outside a house and with that warm milk which she carried, the body of the infant was bathed. [§6]

⁶⁷ These fire miracles will be dealt with later in this chapter.

⁶⁸ Another time the druid and his mother’s brother were in a house and the girl was asleep, whatever place the mother was in. They heard the little voice of the girl in the side of the house, and she had not taken to speaking yet. ‘Look for us’, said the druid to his people, ‘what has taken our girl, for I do not dare for I am not a Christian. He saw her laying in a cross-vigil and she was praying. ‘You go again,’

Here we see de Vries's third motif of the youth of the child being threatened, forcing her to leave the territory of Connacht. Of course, this is part of the pilgrimage of the saint in Bray's variant of the Irish saint's life as well.

This is further fulfilled by her journey home. Once there she begins to perform miracles, assist her mother, and distribute the goods of her father, thus showing a youthful talent for understanding Christian charity. This return of the hero motif is a common one in world myth. Note however that O'Rahilly saw a political dimension in this return of the hero and his triumph over his adversaries (1946: 154-70). Of course, Brigit cannot win in a martial sense, but she does have adversaries, namely her family which sends her away, and she does come into conflict with them:

Ba saeth lia brathrea gait di-si in tinscrae erru. ... Boi drecd dib oc gairib impi; lin ali nibtar faelti frie, i. Bacene asbert:

'Int shuil alaind fil it chiund-su ar-nenustar do fiur cith scith lat'.

La sodain statim ad-aig-si a mmér foa suil

'Ausu duit in(t) suil n-alaind-sin' ar Brigit. 'Dóig lim', olsi, 'ni cunte nech cuccaib filiam cecam.

...

Ocus do-bert mal[l]acht for Baccene 7 fora sil, 7 dixit:

'Mos-memdatar do di suil it chiund'.

Et sic factum est

(*Bethu Brigitte* §15)⁶⁹

said the druid, 'and ask something from her now, for she will say something to you now. He went in to her and he said to her, 'Say something to me, O girl', said he. The girl then twice said to him, 'This will be mine, this will be mine'. However, the uncle of the druid did not understand what this was. 'Clarify this to us,' he said to the druid, 'for I do not understand'. 'You will not be happy from it', said the druid, 'it is that which she has said,' said the druid, 'this place will be with her from now until the day of judgement.' The uncle of the druid shrank from [the thought of] Brigit holding the land. The druid said, 'truly it will come to be. This land will be hers. Provided she goes with me to Munster.

⁶⁹ It distressed her brothers that she was depriving them of their bride price. ... They were coming and laughing at her. The others were not happy with her. Namely, Bacene said: 'The lovely eye which is in your head will be given in marriage though it will not make you happy.' On account of the aforementioned, she immediately thrust her finger under her eye. 'Here is that splendid eye for you,' said Brigit. 'It is not likely,' said she, 'that anyone will want to marry a blind girl. ... she bought a curse upon Baccene and his descendants and said, 'Soon your two eyes will burst in your head.' It happened thus.

At this point, Brigit has triumphed over her family members who have tried to keep her from her proper calling in life. Although she does not receive a worldly domain, she is now freed to take her spiritual one.

The final prophecy of Brigit's future greatness that needs to be discussed occurs when she is asked by a nun to go with her to a synod in Mag Lifi (*Vita I* §15; *Bethu Brigitte* §11). As she approaches, a bishop, specified as Ibor in the *Bethu Brigitte*, but not specifically named in the Latin texts, is telling the congregation of a dream in which he saw Mary coming to dwell amongst the Irish. As Brigit enters, the bishop recognises her as this Mary:

‘...’Haec est Maria quae inter vos habitat’
Is and do-luid in challech 7 Brigit don dail.
‘Haec est Maria quae a me in somnis vissia est’.
(*Bethu Brigitte* §11)⁷⁰

The *Vita I* adds for good measure ‘Tunc omnes glorificauerunt eam quasi in typo Mariae.’ (*Vita I*: 6.17-18)⁷¹ The *Bethu Brigitte* makes a more bold claim, adding that this synod was held in the place that was to become Kildare, and that Ibor predicted that the site would become the richest in all of Ireland (*Bethu Brigitte* §11).

Throughout early Irish literature, druids are able to foresee the coming of the faith. Although Mel, Melchú and Ibor are all able to prophesise Brigit's future greatness, druids do most of the fortune telling. The druid in the Brigidine texts is not the only one in Old Irish literature to predict the new faith or the greatness of the saints who carry this faith forward. Conchobar's druid is able to understand that the earthquake happened because of the death of Christ. As a result of this, Conchobar comes to believe and becomes a sort of martyr; as he rushes forth to avenge the

crucifixion the brain of Mess-Gegra becomes dislodged from his head causing him to die (*The Death of Conchobar* 16 C §§4-5).

However, in hagiography the prophecies of the coming of the faith were less benevolent in their attitude towards the new faith. The most famous example of this is to be found in Muirchú's *Vita Patricii* §10, where Lóegaire's druids foresee the coming of Patrick, and warn the king that this new faith will replace the old one and recite this lay to make their prediction:

'Adueniet ascicaput cum suo ligno curuicapite,
ex sua domu capite perforata incantabit nefas
a sua mensa ex anteriore parte domus suae,
respondebit ei sua familia tota "fiat, fiat".'
(Muirchú 10 (9) [6].10-13)⁷²

When Patrick lights his Easter fire before Lóegaire can light his Beltane fire, the druids again warn that if Patrick's fire is not put out that night, it will never be put out. Despite Lóegaire's best efforts, the fire is never put out (Muirchú I 15(14)-18(17)). Patrick is not the only saint to have such an encounter. Columba forced a druid to release an Irish slave (*VC* II 33) and embarrassed a group of druids who tried to block his passage with a storm by clearing the weather with a prayer (*VC* II 34). Even the normally pleasant Saint Ita has a confrontation with druids (*VSH* II 34).

What is unusual about Brigit's encounters with the druids is that these encounters are quite friendly. Unlike Patrick, Brigit manages to find a peaceful and amicable way to deal with the druids. Indeed, Brigit gets the better results. Rather than scores of druids laid to waste, most of the druids that Brigit encounters convert

⁷⁰ "here is the Mary who will live amongst you." It is then that the nun and Brigit came to the assembly. 'This is Mary who was seen by me in sleep.'

⁷¹ Then they all glorified her as if she were representing of Mary. [§15]

to the new faith. Indeed, it is the druid's Christian uncle who seems to fear the possibility that the girl will rule the land he lives in, while the druid seems to think that this would be a positive development. Unfortunately, the need to protect the child against the druid's Christian relative is left unexplained in the text. Quite obviously, before the coming of Patrick, druids need to do the prophesying, as there are no Christians about. In the case of Brigit, we have members of both faiths telling of her greatness. Indeed living in a world of two faiths would have made it necessary for her to be able to work with both sides of the debate, even if she firmly belonged to one side of it.⁷³

This softer approach to conversion can be seen elsewhere in Irish literature in *Buile Suibhne Geilt*, Suibhne is cursed to a life of insanity in the wilderness after attacking Saint Rónán (§8), but is eventually restored to sanity by Saint Moling (§§74+). The restoration of Suibhne's sanity also eventually leads to his becoming a kind and gentle person, rather than the aggressive figure with which the story begins. In other words, the hard approach of Rónán is supported by the gentle approach of Moling in the eventual conversion of Suibhne. Neither saint is successful in converting Suibhne without the other. While Brigit may well take a "soft" approach to pagans, this should not be taken to mean that she supports paganism or was directly associated with the pre-Christian faith.

⁷² Adzehead shall come, with his staff with a bent head / from his house with a hole in its roof, he will chant heresy / from his table in the front part of his house / all of his family will answer him 'let it be, let it be'.

⁷³ This would seem to place Brigit's early life at around the time of Patrick, whose obit is given in the *AU* as 457, 461, or 492. This is supported by the *Annals*. As previously established, the *Annals* all agree that she died in the mid 520's, the birth date varies. However, they are all broadly in agreement that she was born in the mid fifth century.

A glimpse of this is seen in §31 of the *Vita II*, when a druid sends a simpleton to mill his grain at Kildare. Through the miraculous presence of Brigit, the millstone will not move. Living in a world where paganism still existed, it would have been helpful to convert the people if they did not have cause to believe that they would be smashed against a stone if they encountered a powerful Christian. In other words, the positive depiction of the druids stems from the need to live near them and attempt to convert them. Druids, who have so accurately foreseen the coming of Patrick, albeit with dread, are also able to see the coming of Brigit, but this time with joy. Indeed, contrary to what the druids see with the coming of Patrick, they see the future greatness of this Christian girl so clearly that they treat her with esteem and kindness. The bishops lend Christian credentials to her greatness, indicating that the greatness that is being foreseen is a distinctly Christian one.

Liminality

Liminality and threshold symbolism are universal and essential attributes of any hero (McCone 1991: 187-8). McCone defines liminality and threshold symbolism as involving states or images that operate between worlds, able to perform in each, but not belonging fully to either one (1991: 188). Indeed, the normal human life is full of liminal moments which can be seen in moments such as birth and death as well as rites of passage into puberty or adulthood. Additionally, a liminal state can be achieved by people who hold certain positions within society, such as a shaman, who literally can pass between worlds. Penttiäinen points out that refugees and ethnic minorities can lay claim to this status, as they are both

members of the broader society in which they live, but still a part of another group as well (1979: 163-65). Van Gennep describes the liminal as follows: 'the door is the boundary between the foreign and domestic worlds in the case of an ordinary dwelling, between the profane and sacred worlds in the case of a temple. Therefore to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world.' (1960: 20)

Indeed, mythology abounds with stories of liminality, and both native and Christian traditions abound with such symbolism: Lug, who was not fully a member of the Túatha Dé Danann, but their greatest defender; Cú Chulainn was born of a human mother and divine father; Christ, who was both God and man; and Moses, the Egyptian raised leader of the Hebrews who was forbidden to enter Israel (*Deu* 32: 48-52) are but a few examples of such liminal figures. This middle state allows for a transfer of knowledge between the two worlds, as well as allowing the one world to impact on the other (McCone 1991: 188). As Van Gennep points out, individuals who are in this liminal state, such as those being initiated into adulthood, are often exempted from the taboos and cultural norms that those fully within the culture are expected to adhere to (1960: 114). More recently, Pentikäinen has pointed out that those who live in a liminal state, such as artists, refugees, and we can add to that heroes, saints, and shamans, also live outside of the rules of normal society (1979: 163). While, unlike those undergoing rites of passage whose liminality is only for a short period, they still must function with that society, they still belong somewhat outside of it. As a result, eccentric behaviour is generally accepted, and in modern society these individuals are usually marked by their extraordinarily creative abilities (Pentikäinen 1979: 163). It is not only people who can be liminal. Juliette Wood has recently demonstrated how the islands in the *immrama* tales and the *Navigatio Sancti*

Brendani act as liminal locations, both of this world and outside of it (1993: 60-63). Additionally, Lysaght has convincingly argued that certain times, such as feasts and holidays, such as Beltane can be liminal (1993: 28-42). Indeed, in both of these cases, unusual behaviour was the norm. For example, on the Island of St. Ailbe, Brendan discovered a community which ate only uncooked food, where the temperature was always moderate, and the lights from the lanterns never died (*The Voyage of Saint Brendan*: 246-247). The monks who stayed there also never aged or died (*The Voyage of Saint Brendan*: 246). Lysaght has also pointed out that a number of ritual practices and unusual behaviours that were generally accepted on Beltane would not usually have been accepted at other points of the calendar year (1993: 31-42).

By their very natures, saints are supremely liminal figures. Their greatest moment of triumph is when they pass from this world into heaven without having to await the resurrection. In Irish literature, the saints are described as waiting on an Island off the west coast. An example of this can be seen in *The Voyage of St. Brendan*, Brendan eventually arrives at the 'Land of the Promise of the Saints', although it is not clearly defined as heaven, it is called paradise, and darkness is unknown 'for Christ Himself is our light' (*The Voyage of Saint Brendan*: 267). Clearly then, the figures on this island are in the presence of God, and quite likely in heaven too. In any case, the souls of the saint are in the presence of God, although their bodies and relics remain here, allowing them to intercede from the other world and affect events in this world. Of course, it was necessary for the saint to display this ability during life by performing miracles. Indeed, due to their very nature miracles are themselves liminal moments; the other world is acting on this one,

making them acts neither of this world nor of the other one. In the Christian context, miracles are performed by the saints, but only through the grace of God. It occurs because the saint is a pure enough vessel for the Holy Spirit to move through, and thereby be able to operate in this world. This communion with the Holy Spirit effectively places the saint literally in both worlds, and therefore able to act as a mediator between these worlds. We have seen in a previous chapter that the saint becomes even more effective after death. They maintain a physical presence through relics, though their spirit is in Heaven. Their liminal situation of proximity to the trinity along with a presence in this world allows them to be much more effective than they had ever been while they were alive.

We have seen above an account of Saint Brigit's birth. However, after the account of the birth, it is worth remembering that the author included this brief summary:

Sic enim dixit propheta quod nec in domo nec extra domum ista ancilla pareret; et de lacte illo calido quod portabat corpus infantis mundatus est
(*Vita I*: 3.9-15)⁷⁴

This summary emphasises the unusual and liminal nature of Brigit's birth. There is no indication of any extended difficulty, Brigit just happens to be born at the right moment. The liminal symbolism occurs in a number of ways. Obviously, birth itself is a liminal moment. Second is that this birth occurs within the literally liminal symbol of a threshold. Next, Brigit is born between day and night. Finally, the milk is still warm, indicating that it is between its state in the udder on the one hand, and any human conditioning, such as churning or storing, on the other hand. Finally,

there are a number of liminal aspects of Brigit's birth not explicitly mentioned in the text. For instance, she was also born in the territory of the Uí Néill, but she herself was a Leinster woman. By compounding so many liminal motifs in Brigit's birth, the author is declaring that her saintliness existed from the moment of her birth. While others might have been able to prophesise her greatness, the birth of the child belonging fully to no world confirmed that she was destined to be something beyond the normal baby girl.

The motif of a liminal moment occurring at the correct time and leading to greatness seems to be a very common one in Irish literature. However, there is usually a seeming element of choice in the matter. For instance, upon hearing Cathbad state that whoever was to take their arms on that day would be remembered forever, Cú Chulainn rushes to Conchobar and insists that he be allowed to have his arms. Unfortunately for the young hero, taking up arms on that day also meant a short life (*TBC I*: ll.609-634). An example of choosing the time of birth can be seen in the *Cath Mag Mucrama*. Fíacha Mullethan (Wide Back) was ready to be born when his mother, impregnated by Eogan shortly before he was killed in battle, was told by her druid father that if it were born next morning, her offspring would live in Ireland forever. In response, she sat herself on a rock in the middle of a ford to await the appropriate time. When the sun rose, she released the child to be born. As a result, his mother died, and Fíacha was born with a wide head, giving him his name (*The Battle of Mag Mucrime* §§42-43). This birth, which is liminal in the sense of it

⁷⁴ For this was how the prophet said, that neither inside a house nor outside a house, that slave woman would give birth, and with that warm milk which she carried, the body of the infant was bathed. [§6]

occurring in the middle of a ford, between day and night, and between birth and death, shows the importance of liminality in the culture's belief systems.

It should be noted that Brigit's position in society is liminal as well. Her father, Dubthach, was a nobleman, while her mother, Bróicsech, was a bondmaid. This effectively places Brigit between the two extremes of her society. However, it is extremely difficult to place Brigit's exact position in her family. This is further exacerbated by her liminal position within this group. However, the bishops attempt to resolve this situation when Dubthach is ordered by Mel:

'Sed tamen ancillam sicut filios tuos ama, quia progenies illius
tuo semini multum proficiet.'
(*Vita I*: 2. 17-19)⁷⁵

However, he sells Brigit's mother off to live with an unnamed poet, who in turn almost immediately sells her to a druid. While there is a close similarity to fosterage here, it is not quite the same thing since it was the slave mother only being sold; the child she was carrying was not included in the sale. In effect, Brigit is in a situation where she is both a member of her father's family and yet still not a full member. However, as a child Brigit demands to be returned to her father (*Bethu Brigitte* §6; *Vita I* §12). He happily takes her back to his home, where she is now accepted as a free person. After this, Brigit is promptly sent out again, this time to be fostered by a Christian woman.

Her liminal position in society would continue into adulthood as well. Indeed, while as a saint she was by definition a liminal figure, her earthly position as a virgin was also a role that forced her to operate between different worlds. The

⁷⁵ 'But nevertheless, love the bondmaid the same as your sons because her progeny will greatly benefit your sons.' [§3]

exact role of the nun in early Irish society will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter. For now it should be pointed out that the position of a nun was itself a liminal one. Nuns live outside of the 'normal' world, and are at least attempting to move closer to God. We shall also see that the nun, although a woman, was attempting to be more masculine. For example, Bray points out that Saint Monenna was described 'virilem enim animum in femineo gerebat corpore' (Salmanticensis: 89, §19; Bray 1999: 171).⁷⁶ While Brigit is not herself described as 'virilis', her ability to control her desires of the flesh would have placed her above other women who were seen as being weaker, and more prone to temptations of the flesh, as well as being agents of temptation for men (Cameron 1994: 153).

The *Bethu Brigte* mentions that Brigit would always know if guests were coming, and would always produce enough bread for all of them. Both texts then tell a tale of Brigit going to fetch some ale to heal her foster mother, and being refused, whereupon she is able to turn the water from a well into ale and heal the woman (*Bethu Brigte* §8, *Vita I* §13). Interestingly, this is the last mention of Brigit's foster mother in the texts. Afterwards, it seems as though the main agent of raising Brigit is her father, Dubthach. The insertion of Brigit being fostered by a Christian woman places a balance on the early pagan upbringing by a druid. This effectively places her in a liminal position between the Christian and pagan worlds. This is especially true given her friendly relations with the druids. Indeed, she has a remarkably high success rate at converting druids. For instance, she went back to visit her mother, who was still owned by the druid. While there she discovered that her mother was away. Because of that, she did some work for her mother. As a result of her work

⁷⁶ She had a masculine spirit in the body of a woman

she produced enough butter for a feast after only one and a half churnings. The druid responded to this by declaring:

‘Bit lat do bae 7 fodail a n-im do bochtaib, 7 ní bia do mathair
ondiu i fognam 7 níba ecen a luag; 7 num-baitsibfithir-sa 7 ní sger frit-
su semper’
(*Bethu Brigte* §12).⁷⁷

Her success rate at converting the druids indicates that she is not simply a conduit between Christians and Christ. She is also able to move between the Christian world and the pagan one. This should not be taken to mean that she was a particularly pagan saint. Rather her friendliness with and success at converting druids indicates that she is able to act as a conduit between God and the druids. As we shall see in the forthcoming chapter, Brigit is able to communicate with the druids on their own terms, but the message she delivers is still a Christian one.

The Druidic Upbringing of Brigit

In Medieval Irish literature we generally have two traditions about druids. One of these traditions is to be found in the Irish saga texts, and in this literature we see the druids as wise men who are knowledgeable about the other world, giving counsel to kings and even, in the case of the Ulster druid Cathbad, predicting the coming of Christ. In contrast to this, we have a second tradition of the druids acting as foils to the saints in hagiography. These figures are usually depicted as being malicious, devious, ruthless and cunning, that is, of course, unless they converted to

⁷⁷ ‘These cows will be yours and distribute them to the poor, and your mother will not be in service, and you shall not have to purchase her, and I will be baptised, and I will never leave you.’

the new faith. The one exception to this dichotomy is to be found in the Brigidine texts. In these stories it is a druid who recognises his own impurity and treats Brigit with love and care as he fosters the child. As we shall see, at one point he even gives wise counsel to Brigit's Christian uncle on how to treat her. Despite this, he was not terribly eager to convert, and he waited until Brigit was older before he converted

To begin with, we must first look at how druids were perceived in the saga texts. As mentioned, they were wise leaders and good counsellors. The most famous of these druids was Cathbad, the druid to Conchobar in the Ulster Cycle. Often his advice is good. In the *Táin* he is able to rightly predict that Cú Chulainn will become a great warrior (*TBC LL* 909-911), and in *The Death of Conchobar* he is able to see the crucifixion of Christ. This is not to say that he was saintly by any means (§11). For instance, the story *Tidings of Conchobar mac Nessa* begins with Cathbad going on a murderous circuit with a *fian* band while still in his youth (§§1-3). Indeed, in spite, or more likely because of, Christian influence, the druid was still given considerable power in the texts, and was given the right to speak before the king was allowed to do so. However, if this was a reflection of real power or not we cannot know. McCone points out that by giving such high status to druids in the past, Irish clergy paved the way for their own high status (1991: 230-32). McCone has convincingly argued that the Irish saw their history as a micro version of world history leading to the adoption of Christianity. For example McCone points out that the wandering of the Gaels in the *LGE* bears remarkable similarity to the wandering of the Jews in Exodus (1991: 66-69). The Irish Canons state 'Aaron summum sacerdotem, id est episcopum figurasse, et filios eius presbiterorum figuram praemonstrasse' (*CCH*

i.4).⁷⁸ McCone points to the Old Testament orders of *reges*, *prophetae*, and *sacerdotes* in early Irish exegesis and equates this with the orders of king, filid, and druid in early Irish literature (1991: 230). The example which he cites is in the *Scél na Fír Flatha*, when Cormac mac Airt's cauldron gave everyone a piece of meat the quality of which was based upon their status. It would perform this miracle if there had been sung 'dichetal flatha 7 filedh 7 druad' (*Scél na Fír Flatha* §3).⁷⁹ Since both the druid and the priest both occupied the position of *sacerdotes* in the literature, any king claiming to be a good Christian would on this view feel forced to give a bishop an equal or greater status than a pagan king would have given to druid. While we do not know whether this was an accurate reflection of the past, we can be sure that by actively promoting the image of politically powerful druids, who were later to be replaced by priests of the new faith, the Christian clergy were also promoting their own political self interest.

However, in the seventh century, when Patrick arrived as a literary figure, the behaviour of the druid had to change in the literary texts. While still high ranking, their position was now usurped by what was seen as the one true faith. However, the druids of literature were not so willing to part with their power. This led to a battle of supernatural ability during the lighting of the Beltane fires at Tara. In this episode of Muirchú's text Patrick outperformed the druids by, in essence, beating them at their own game (Muirchú 20(19)). Indeed, the entire episode seemed to be crafted so as to be similar to Moses' encounter with Pharaoh's magi, as when Moses ordered Aaron to throw down his staff during an encounter with Pharaoh:

⁷⁸ That Aaron functioned as a of high priest, i.e. as of a bishop, and his sons prefigured the figure of the priest.

⁷⁹ incantation of a king, poet and druid

Aaron threw down his staff before Pharaoh and his officials and it became a snake. Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same with their secret arts. Each one threw down his staff, and they became snakes; but Aaron's staff swallowed up theirs.
(Exo 8: 10-12).

While in the hagiography the druids changed their behaviour for the worse and were humiliated by Patrick and others, in the real world druids were suffering a decline in their status. The penitentials give harsh punishment for druidry:

For there are certain sins which are not entitled to any remission of the penitence due for them, however long be the period prescribed for them, unless God Himself shorten it by means of death or a message (?) of sickness or the amount of (extra?) mortification a person takes on himself. Such are, for example, kin-slayings, homicides, and secret murders; also brigandage, druidism, and satirizing, further, adultery, incest, perjury, heresy, and violations of (the duties of one's ecclesiastical) grade.

(*The Old Irish Table of Commutations* §5)

The *Bretha Crólige* grants sick maintenance to druids, brigands and satirists only at the level of a *bóaire* (CIH 2300.6-10), which Kelly points out was one of lowest ranking freemen classes in Ireland (1997: 10).

A more moderate view of druids is to be found in the Brigidine lives. One of the immediate concerns of the authors of the *vitae* may have been the presence of actual druids. We know that druids were present during Cogitosus's lifetime. In §31 the author describes an episode which he claims to have actually witnessed. In this posthumous miracle, a druid sends a simpleton to Kildare to have his grain milled. However, the millstone refuses to move when this simpleton put the grain on the stone. Afterwards, they realise that Brigit has prevented the milling of a druid's grain. While it seems that the monastic centre is so powerful that a druid needs to scheme to have his grain milled there, it is also clear that there are still pagans around

in the seventh century. Of course, we have seen that Cogitosus was not attempting to appeal to a non-Christian audience. Rather his aim was to attract pilgrims to Kildare. It is likely that a druid being made to look foolish would have appealed to a Christian audience, especially if for that audience druids were still a real presence.

We must remember that, although compiled later, large sections of the *Vita I* were composed before the *Vita II*, and would have had to face the same problem of being written in a context that still included pagan druids. While the question of audience remains a significant, if unanswered question, we see a remarkable difference in the actions of the druids in the *Vita I* and the later Old Irish *Bethu Brigte* as compared to other hagiographic texts. The kindly behaviour of the druid who fosters Brigit might be seen as the proper behaviour for good pagans in the face of the Christian faith. As opposed to the confrontational approach of the male saints, such as Patrick and Columba, Brigit is able to get the druids to see the folly of their heathen ways. Of course, seeing the folly of their ways is still not enough to get them to convert immediately. Brigit's fosterer sees his weakness in the face of Christianity, but does not convert:

Fa-indel avunculus magi Brigitam tenere plepem. As-bert in drui:
'Vere implebitur. Ipsius erit hic campus, licet exeat mecum ad
Mumenenses.
(*Bethu Brigte* §4)⁸⁰

While the druid can foresee that Brigit will hold this land in Connacht, he takes her to Munster, possibly to protect her against any ambitious individuals. In particular, there is one individual who seems to be nervous about this, namely the druid's Christian uncle who does not want the girl to be in possession of the land. In

addition, in §2 the druid is instructed by priests to name the baby Brigit, and in §3 he tells his uncle that the girl will be holy.

The druid again recognises the holiness of the girl in §5:

In tan ba mithig a gait de c[h]ígh ba deithidnech di in drui.
Na(ch) ní do-bereth-side di-si na-sceth-si fa chet-hoir, 7 nibu messa de a blath.

‘Ra-[f]jetur-sa tra’, ar in drui, ‘a(n) daas ind ingen, quia ego sum immundus’.

Ro-erbad iarum bó find audercc dia taiscid 7 ba slan di.

(*Bethu Brigitte* §5)⁸¹

It is interesting that in both of these cases the druid acknowledges his impurity and what he perceives to be the truth of the Christian faith, but he does not convert until §12 of the Old Irish text, and §17 of the *Vita I*. As we shall explore in greater detail in a later chapter, this is one of the most profound examples of the feast being used to convert a pagan:

Ba and-sin do-bretha di-ssi ruisc dia linad o mnai in druad. Nis-boí acht maistreth imbe co lleith. Linta ind ruisc do suidiu; 7 batar budig ind oigith, .i. in drui 7 a ben. As-bert in drui fri Brigit:

‘Bit lat do bae 7 fodail a n-im do bochtaib, 7 ní bia do mathair ondiu i fognam 7 niba ecen a luag; 7 num-baitsibfither-sa 7 ní sger frit-su semper’.

‘Deo gratias’, ar Brigit.

(*Bethu Brigitte* §12)⁸²

⁸⁰ The uncle of the druid shrank from Brigit holding the land. The druid said, ‘truly, it will be fulfilled. This plain will be hers, although she come with me to Munster.’

⁸¹ When it was time to take her from the teat, the druid was worried. Anything he gave to her, she vomited it immediately, and her colour was not the worse from it. ‘I know it,’ said the druid, ‘what ails the girl. It is because I am impure.’ Then a white red eared cow was entrusted to sustain her, and she was made whole from it.

⁸² Then baskets were brought for her to fill from the wife of the druid. However, she had only the butter from one and a half churnings. The baskets were filled with that, and the guests were thankful, that is the druid and his wife. The druid said to Brigit, ‘These cows will be yours and distribute their butter to the poor, and your mother will not be in service, and you shall not have to purchase her, and I will be baptised, and I will never leave you.’ ‘Thanks be to God,’ said Brigit.

There are slight differences, between the two texts, notably that in the Latin life, Brigit gives away the goods that she received from the druid, and the druid does not offer to stay with her in perpetuity.

Recently, Thomas Charles-Edwards has dealt with the problem of the “good druids” (2000: 208-210). He points out that this problem was considerable for authors of early Ireland: if the Incarnation was essential for salvation, what was to happen to those who existed in an environment where the faith had not reached. Augustine solved this problem by appealing to the Old Testament, and arguing that the words and actions of prophets prefigured the coming of Christ. In so doing, both the prophets and their adherents could achieve grace, even if they were not conscious of the coming of Jesus (Charles-Edwards 2000: 209). This Augustinian view, Charles-Edwards argues, was blended by the Irish with the Pelagian notion that grace could be achieved through virtue and the good druid was thus created (2000: 209). The Pelagian element may not be needed to explain the presence of the good druid, indeed, MacAlister has convincingly argued that the *Lebor Gabála* is an attempt to syncretise the Israelites with the Irish (1938: xxvi-xxix). If the histories of the two groups are closely aligned, then possibly the role of the priestly classes would be as well. In short, Augustine may have simply been adapted to suit local concerns rather than to be blended with a heresy that Augustine himself was devoted to stamping out. While this seen clearly enough in the case of druids, such as Cathbad, who lived at the time of Christ, druids who practised the faith after the crucifixion remained an unsolved problem. We have seen that in the literature the druids foresaw, and were contemptuous of, the coming of Patrick. However, with the life of Brigit we see

them taking the final steps towards preparing for the coming of the faith. This is done by assisting in the upbringing of one of the new faith's most important figures.

The common factor shared by the *Bethu Brigitte* and *Vita I* is the fact that the druid does eventually convert. It would seem that the good behaviour of the druids is a model for living pagans to follow. Additionally, Brigit's friendliness with the pagans provides a possible model by which pagans can be converted. By obeying and protecting the Christian priests and later the Christian child the druid provides an example of how pagans should behave. Rather than resisting, as the druids do in the lives of other saints, the druids that surround Brigit recognise her greatness, and submit themselves to her wishes. However, they come into the fold only when they are given something in return. Indeed, it would seem more likely that practitioners of the pre-Christian faith would be converted by a religion that offered them something in return. While a promise of eternal salvation might seem tempting, ultimately worldly concerns play a major factor in a person's faith. A faith which offered kindness and abundance and which did not present the pagans and their ancestors as evil men, worthy of nothing more than a simple bash against a stone, would probably be more attractive than a religion which was fully hostile. Ultimately, this friendly approach probably reflected the reality of conversion better than the hostile and militant tactics used in the works of Muirchú.

It should be added, that in being raised by druids, Brigit was in good company. Moses himself was raised by Pharaoh's daughter, but nursed by an Israelite (Exo. 2:5-10), and the Magi were present at the birth of Christ (Mat. 2:1-15). The upbringing of Moses seems remarkably similar to Brigit, raised by a druid, but fostered by a Christian. Whatever the implications, the texts on which these sections

are based seem to date from a time when paganism was still a force to be reckoned with. By creating a liminal figure who is able to enjoy good relations with people from the pagan world the Brigidine authors create a character who becomes a strong agent of the faith and who is able to reach out to those who have not yet been converted. These motifs survive into the ninth century and later because the authors place Brigit in the earliest moments of Christianity. She is present while the conversion is taking place, and is an active force in shaping and forming the fledgling church.

Fire

One of the most heavily commented upon aspects of the Brigidine biographies is the role that fire plays, especially in the earlier parts of Brigit's life. Of particular importance are the miracles where fire itself is the central theme of the episode. McCone deals with this issue, but seems unsure of whether this fire aspect is the result of a conscious attempt to include biblical themes in Brigit's life, or is the result of Indo-European and Celtic pre-Christian motifs entering our saint's dossier (1991: 174-78). However, as we shall see, he rightly calls upon the theories of Lévi-Strauss in explaining how the childhood fire miracles in the texts operate to make our saint a Christian figure. Responding to this, Dorothy Bray points out that almost all of these fire episodes are similar to Biblical episodes and should be seen as such (1992: 105-112). However, while Bray rightly identifies the most likely source of the fire miracles, her account does not deal directly with the role that the fire plays in the biographies.

The fire motif in Irish hagiography is a common occurrence. §4 of the *Vita I* relates that while Brigit was still in the womb, a holy man who was a guest of the poet who now owned Bróicsech, prayed all through the night. As he did this, a ball of fire appeared in the place where her mother was sleeping. In §7 of the *Vita I* and §1 of the *Bethu Brigte*,⁸³ Brigit is in a house that seems to be burning down, but manages to survive unscathed:

Post haec autem ille magus cum ancilla perrexit ad regionem Connachtorum et habitauit ibi, quia de Connachtis erat mater illius magi, pater uero de Muminensibus. Quadam autem die exiit ancilla ista ad mulgendas uaccas procul, et reliquit filiam solam dormientem in domo. Tunc domus illa accensa igne apparebat, et cucurrerunt omnes ut extinguerent ignem, et cum appropinquassent domum, ignis non apparuit; et uiderunt puellam letantem in domo pulchra facie et genis rubigundis, et dixerunt omnes: 'Haec autem puella plena est Spiritu Sancto.'
(*Vita I*: 3. 16-26)⁸⁴

An almost identical miracle occurs in the *Life of Ita* while she is an infant, while it also happens to Samthann as she is about to get married, and to Lasair, who chants psalms while her church is actually being burnt and pillaged. Indeed, Lasair's name means 'fire', and Samthann's name means 'summer fire' (Bray 1992: 105-06). However, fire is not restricted to female saints. As we shall see, Patrick's encounter at Tara centres around fire, and there is a male saint and smith named Daig, whose name means 'flame' or 'fire' (McCone 1991: 164).⁸⁵ Bray maintains that these miracles, at least within the context of Irish hagiography, seem to have originated with Saint Brigit (1992: 106).

⁸³ This episode survives only in fragmentary form in the *Bethu Brigte*.

⁸⁴ After this, moreover, that druid with the slave woman went to the region of the Connachta and lived there, because the mother of the druid was of the Connachta, although his father was of Munster. Then on a certain day that slave woman went out to milk cows, that were far away, and she left her daughter sleeping alone in the house. Then that house appeared to be alight in fire, and everyone ran to extinguish the fire. And when they got near to the house the fire was not apparent, and they saw the

McCone makes the case that the precedence for the use of fire is strongly grounded in the Bible, and thus would have been acceptable to Christian audience. Of course, much of the Biblical usage of fire is in the form of retribution and punishment (1991: 174-75). Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire and brimstone (Gen. 19:24), and hell was described in Mark as an ‘unquenchable fire’ (9:43). Indeed, we have seen how Patrick used fire to elevate the new faith while defeating the druids of Tara. In addition to destruction of sinful people, Low points out that fire and solar worship in the Old Testament could also indicate a relapse in idolatry: ‘with their backs to the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east, prostrating themselves to the sun toward the east.’ (Eze. 8:16-18)

Fire and solar worship may have strong antecedents in the pagan past of Ireland as well. Lug has often drawn comparison to the Indo-European sun god or hero, although this has recently been attacked by Low, who suggests that many of the descriptions of Lug’s solar brilliance are late developments. Low also points out that in the *Táin*, when Lug comes to heal Cú Chulainn, the gold furnishings which he is wearing could be described as the trappings of his kingly wealth (Low 1996, 151-52, *TBC I* 2093-2098). T. F. O’Rahilly points that there are numerous gods that might be described as sun gods. His list includes the Dagda, Balor, Goll, and Núadu (O’Rahilly 1946: 58-74). While this is not the place to discuss the complexities of these various figures and their solar associations, it is worth noting that numerous goddesses were associated with the sun. Notably Áine, whose name was cognate with brightness, heat, and speed, as well as Grían, whose name literally means ‘sun’.

girl rejoicing in the house with a beautiful form and ruby cheeks, and they all said: ‘This girl, moreover, is full of the Holy Spirit.’ [§7]

⁸⁵ For a full etymology see op. cit.

O' Rahilly argues that these figures might be associated with the Indo-European sun god, or in this case 'goddess', motif (O'Rahilly 1946: 290).

Of course, much of the fire symbolism in the Bible is positive. Exodus has frequent fire symbolism, notably, the pillar of fire that leads the Israelites (Exo. 13:17-21), the burning bush (Exo. 3:1-12), and perhaps, for our purposes the most significant episode, when Moses descends from Mt. Sinai with his face glowing (Exo. 34: 29-34). While fire symbolism is particularly conspicuous in Exodus, there are numerous other examples of fire symbolism in the Bible. For example, God appears to Ezekiel in a fiery chariot (Eze. 1:1-28). The image of fire as a symbol of burning faith is also used, such as when seraphim place a hot stone in Isaiah's mouth to purify it for prophecy (6: 5-7). Ireland incorporated such fire imagery in its descriptions of the new faith, for instance the *Críth Gablach* labels the new faith as 'crettem ad-annai' (*CIH* ii. 423-24).⁸⁶

McCone agrees with Lévi-Strauss in seeing fire as an agent of change, both constructive and destructive (1991: 170-71). In his work *The Raw and the Cooked* (1970), Lévi-Strauss identifies cooking in Amerindian culture as a process of mediation and transformation between one state to another. In taking raw wild meat and transforming it into something edible for human consumption, cooking is a process by which mediation between civilisation and wildness, as well as life and death occurs (1970: 64-5). McCone argues that this transformative ability is seen in the three aspects of the triple Brigit described by Bishop Cormac (1991: 161-63). In his *Glossary*, Bishop Cormac describes Brigit as a daughter of the Dagda, who was a patron of poets and poetry, and that she had two sisters, also named Brigit, one of

whom was described as being a physician, and the other as a female smith (*Cormac's Glossary*: 23). McCone wavers on the point of the origin of Brigit's fire miracles, on the one hand saying that these miracles: 'may be rooted in the properties of these saints' (Daig and Brigit) arguable pagan precursors.' (1982: 175) He also points out that our saint has little affinity with the three Brigits mentioned in the passage above (1982: 162-63). Saint Brigit does not do any smithing, and only once recites any poetry, at the end of the *Bethu Brigitte*. Additionally, since healing is such a common motif in European hagiography, there is no reason to assume any link between this triple goddess and Saint Brigit of Kildare. Davies has noted that Brigit has a higher percentage of healing miracles for an early Irish Saint, with 9% of the miracles in the *Vita II*, 38% in the first third of the *Vita I*, 28% in the last two thirds of that text and 40% in the *Bethu Brigitte* constituting healing (1989: 44). Although this is a significantly higher percentage of healing than we find in other early saints' *vitae*,⁸⁷ Davies notes that we do find a trend towards female saints becoming more active in healing in later texts (1989: 45). While these links may be accurate for a triple goddess bearing the name 'Brigit', we must look for another reason for our saint's fire associations.

While obviously fire has a destructive aspect, as seen in the examples above, Biblical fire often does not damage the object that it is burning. We have seen that the *Críth Gablach* describes Christianity as 'crettem ad-annai'. This would seem to indicate that Christianity is capable of both lighting the flame of belief in Christians as well as burning away heresy and paganism. An example of this is seen in

⁸⁶ The faith that alights.

⁸⁷ 17% of Íta's miracles concern healing, which is still higher than the other male saints from this period, the highest of which is found in the VC, with 9% (Davies 1989: 44), this again suggests that

Patrick's famous encounter with the druids in Muirchú's *Life of Patrick*, Patrick arranged for one of his followers to be put in a house made half of green wood, half made of dry wood. Benignus, Patrick's follower, went into the half made of dry wood clad in a druid's uniform, while a druid wearing Patrick's robe entered the green half of the house. Patrick prayed while the house was burnt, after which only Benignus, who was now unclad, and Patrick's robe, which had formerly been on the druid were left untouched by the fire (Muirchú I 20 (19) [10-15]). In Lévi-Straussian terms, because Benignus and the robe had already been cooked and purified with the fire of faith, they were able to resist the fire, while the druid and his uniform were still raw, and therefore cooked in the fire.

Bray identifies a similar theme in the Brigidine texts. However, she avoids the associations of Saint Brigit with her pagan namesake that McCone makes. She rightly identifies these miracles as biblical motifs while acknowledging that we cannot directly associate any of these motifs with the pagan Brigit (1991: 105-112). However, while Bray identifies the source of these miracles, she stops short of discussing the context of these miracles in the *vitae*. Indeed, it would seem that miracles not only identify Brigit as a holy person, but also help to shape her sacred nature. All of the fire miracles occur when Brigit is young, significantly none of them occurs after Brigit takes the veil to become a nun. Indeed, as we shall see, her final fire miracle happens as she takes the veil. We have seen that both §7 of the *Vita I* and §1 of the *Bethu Brigitte* involve Brigit surviving unscathed in a house that appears to be on fire. This episode is the first to occur after her birth. Given that she was born to the slave of a druid, and therefore in a pagan environment, the

healing may have been more exclusive to female saints than to male.

transformation of her soul is a necessary one. This episode, if not the most dramatic fire episode in the texts, is certainly the most public, with the entire *túath* rushing to help put out the fire. The fire acts as a purifying agent, cleansing the girl's soul, while leaving her physical body undamaged. The fire transforms, in other words cooks, Brigit from being an infant into being a holy agent in an un-Christian area. All of this occurs in the presence of her community, who afterwards, at least in the *Vita I*, all declare that 'Haec autem puella plena est Spiritu Sancto' (*Vita I*: 3, 25-6).⁸⁸

The *Vita I* immediately follows this with the druid and Brigit's mother seeing a fiery cloth on the child's head. When they reach out to grab the cloth there is no fire. This brief miracle, which does not occur in the other lives, seems to relate to Brigit taking the veil (§20). Indeed, it is only in the *Vita I* that a column of fire arises from Brigit's head as she takes the veil. This episode seems to be stating clearly that Brigit is not only destined to be a holy woman, but also that the manner in which she will become holy is preordained as well. The very fire that speaks of her holiness also has played a crucial role in shaping it.

Soon after this, in both the *Bethu Brigitte* (§2), and the *Vita I* (§9), the druid has a vision of three priests baptising the child and naming her Brigit. Such an image conveniently avoids allowing anyone to claim responsibility for baptising Brigit, thus preventing her *paruchia* from potentially finding itself in a subservient position of another cult claiming priority over Kildare because their saint had baptised Brigit. The following episodes simply describe the druid, with either an unidentified man, as in the *Vita I*, or his uncle, as in the *Bethu Brigitte*, witnessing a column of fire arising from the house where Brigit and her mother are staying. In the *Bethu Brigitte*, the

⁸⁸ Indeed, this girl is full of the Holy Spirit [§7]

uncle, who is a Christian, realises that this fire indicates her holiness. The druid takes this one step further by acknowledging that it is true, and that he knows what deeds she will perform in her life. This is still a part of the transformative process. Although the two priests baptise the child only in a vision, it is, in effect, a second birth into the Christian world. This fire complements the visionary baptism, indeed, baptism by Holy Spirit manifests itself as fire in the Acts of the Apostles (2: 3-4). While this baptism cleanses and purifies the child, it also has a greater impact on shaping the child. Indeed, the fire's creative aspect in this miracle is so clear that it allows the druid to foresee the child's future accomplishments. In effect, fire appears after both of Brigit's births to shape, mould, and direct her progress, allowing her to become a holy figure in an area where paganism is still, at the very least, quite strong.

The final fire episode occurs as Brigit is taking the veil to become a nun. The accounts vary slightly. The *Vita I* is even more explicit in its use of fire. In §20.2-3 fire rises from the top of Brigit's head as she awaits the veiling. Then, as she receives the veil, she grabs hold of the wooden altar, which was never to decay or blemish. While this presumably means that it is resistant to fire, fire is not specifically mentioned in this text. In addition, her eye, which she had previously removed to avoid marriage, was miraculously healed. This would seem to indicate that the eye can now be healed because she is now beyond temptation – not only because she is a nun, indeed, nuns can still tempt and be tempted, but also because she has now been completely purified of her sin. By virtue of this transformation, she can no longer be tempted, and her eyesight may be restored. In the Old Irish text, the altar miraculously transformed into acacia, and the text specifically mentions that

it is fire resistant. Moreover, in this text Brigit is consecrated as a bishop and as this occurs a fiery column arises from her head:

Advenienti hora consecrationis, elevatum ab angelis velamen de manu Maic Calle ministri super caput sanctae Brigitae ponitur. Curvata hautem sub incantationem, interi[m] tenuit lignum fraxinum altare sustinentem, quod postea ussam est in sethim nec igni u[r]itur nec saeculis veteratur. Tribus vicibus cella incensa est, sed intigrum sub cinere mansit.

(*Bethu Brigitte* §18)⁸⁹

Cogitosus also mentions this particular miracle (*Vita II* §2). Of course, with his particular interest in promoting the monastery of Kildare, he pays greater attention to the altar itself. There is no fire column, nor any healing of the eyes. He only mentions that when Brigit touched the altar it became transformed, and remained unblemished. He also adds that the altar rids the faithful of illness and disease, but there is no mention of fire in his version. This is somewhat surprising given that such an event could have been a remarkable attraction to any potential pilgrims. For our purposes, the *Vita II* is free of any fire association or childhood miracles that can be placed earlier than her ordination. In other words, when dealing with the fire miracles of Brigit, at least while she was still alive, we are dealing specifically with the *Vita I* and *Bethu Brigitte*.

The fire from the head bears a remarkable similarity to Acts (2:3): 'Divided tongues of fire, as of fire appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them'. This moment in the Bible is the fulfilment of a prophecy by Christ that the apostles will be baptised with the Holy Spirit (*Acts* 1:4-5). The apostles then begin to

⁸⁹ The hour of her consecration came. The veil was raised by angels from the hand of Mac Caille, the minister. It was put above the head of Saint Brigit. Moreover, she was bent down during prayer, while holding onto the ash wood which supported the altar. Afterwards, this was changed into Acacia. It was neither consumed by fire or not aged by generations. Three times at that place the church was burned. But it remained intact under the ashes.

Speak in tongues, so that all those assembled can hear them preach. Of course, Roman Judea had a good many more languages than medieval Ireland, so Brigit does not need to speak in a multitude of languages. In addition, the people who are around her at this point already believe in Christ. Instead, the fact that the Holy Spirit is moving through her is shown by the fact that the altar is changed and made unblemishable.

Each time the fire moves through Brigit it is at a major liminal moment in her life. First while she is still in the womb between conception and birth, then after birth, then after a symbolic baptism, and finally as she becomes a nun. After this final episode, she ceases to experience miracles that revolve exclusively around resistance to fire. This would seem to indicate that the burning imagery of Brigit has served its purpose and the purpose of the fire is no longer needed. While the Holy Spirit still obviously moves through her as she performs miracles, there is no longer any need of fire to manifest itself. It would seem that the fire has been crucial in creating and shaping Brigit into a holy woman. Once she has taken the veil and become a nun, she is, in effect, cooked and purified by the fire that does not burn. Her holiness is complete, and there is no more shaping to be done.

Purification by fire is found in the *Vita I* (§97). When a pupil of Brigit named Darlugdach was tempted and had sex with a man, she struggled between her fear of God and Brigit and her passion for this man. After praying to and receiving counsel from God, she filled her shoes with hot coals and placed her feet into them. Brigit was watching this, unseen by the student. The following morning, Brigit healed the girl's feet and informed the girl that she would not burn with such passion again for the physical fire and pain, had extinguished the spiritual fire and pain.

However, it must be pointed out that Brigit continued to be associated with fire after her death. Cogitosus, who eliminated both the fire bursting from Brigit's head at her consecration, as well as her natal and early childhood miracles, and therefore her fire and solar associations, includes a miracle from her later life (*Vita II* §26). In this miracle, she does not actually prevent anything from burning, or keep anything safe while burning. Rather a cow and a loom are miraculously restored to a poor woman who burnt her loom to cook a cow for Brigit. There is also a series of miracles about a millstone at Kildare, which survived a fall down a large hill, refused to grind a druid's grain, survived a fire, and healed the sick (*Vita II* §31). It is only after the fire that the millstone begins to heal the sick. Here we see healing and fire being merged; however, this again seems to be the fire of faith that does no damage to the stone. Rather the stone is purified by the fire. Once it has been purified in the fire, it is able to act as a conduit by which Brigit can heal the sick.

Conclusion

Brigit then is effectively a highly liminal figure. Her biographers have created a character whose sacred nature is immediately obvious from her youth, indeed even before her birth. Whether or not the Brigidine authors were consciously aware of the international heroic biography, they created a biography that conformed to it, probably derived from other saints' *vitae* as well as biblical sources and local traditions. Throughout her childhood Brigit is a liminal figure, a symbol which underlines and highlights her sacred nature.

Her sacredness is readily apparent to even those pagans who have not yet converted to the new faith. In being raised by a druid, Brigit mirrors Moses, and while Brigit may not have physically led the Irish to a new land, she did help lead them spiritually to a different place. As we shall see in a later chapter, Brigit was particularly adept at converting pagans and druids. Possibly, because she understood their world as a result of being immersed in it, she was especially effective at dealing with them. One of the most obvious manifestations of the Holy Spirit is the presence of a fire that burns but which does not harm the child, and later the woman taking the veil. In effect, what is occurring is that the child is created and shaped by the holy fire as a person who can travel between different worlds. Both priests and druids see her purity and greatness, she is a divine person living on Earth, and she is able to operate within all of the worlds. Of course, other factors shape the biography of Brigit beyond just holiness and liminality, and it is some of these factors that we will explore in the coming chapters.

Chapter 2

Brigit and Gender

Introduction

In order to appreciate the difference between male and female saints both in western Christendom in general and in Ireland specifically, we must first attempt to understand how the difference between men and women was perceived. To begin with, there is an obvious physical difference between the sexes and this caused a great deal of anxiety for the early church fathers and thinkers. These men were able to find plenty of grounds to support their views in these differences both in the Bible and in the works of earlier pagan thinkers. As we shall see, women were thought of as having bodies that were more prone to sin. As a result, in order to achieve sanctity, they would have a greater need than men to reject the physical in favour of their relationship with Christ. The biographies of these women, who accomplished their triumph over their bodies, were probably written down by, for the most part at any rate, men. These men were likely to have reflected their ideal views of what femininity was onto the saintly women, while not allowing the voices of real women to be heard (Johnston 1995: 198). While this means that we cannot use hagiography as a reliable source for the lives of real women, we can begin to get a picture of how gender was perceived, or at least how the male authors had constructed it within the text. The end result of this approach was that the characters in the hagiography were still seen as being biologically women, however they were women whom their

biographers saw as an ideal, and that ideal was considered to be more women who had a masculine personality and soul.

Many ideas about women written by early Christian fathers and doctors filtered their way into Ireland along with the new faith. As we shall see, by the Middle Ages, both in Ireland and elsewhere in the West, ideas about how gender was biologically constructed were not clearly defined, instead we find an assortment of different views, by different authors, in various texts. Unfortunately, medical tracts in Ireland, or indeed most of western Christendom, did not provide a clear view on human anatomy (Davies 1989: 50-52, Green 1985: 168-70). Instead, medieval physicians were often reliant upon prayers and potions without a clearly defined view of medicine and anatomy to support these cures. However, there was a generally accepted view that women were weaker and that this weakness was based in their physical bodies, often this weakness was due to a belief that the female body was made from an excess of fluid. In order to overcome this weakness, women would have had to abandon their natural desires for food, drink, and sex in order allow their bodies to become drier and therefore stronger. However, with the obvious exception of sex, Brigit does not abandon any of these practices. Instead, her body seems not to have been much of an obstacle to her closeness to the love of the Holy Spirit. As we shall see in this section, while this may or may not be due to any pagan influences, Brigit's prominent role as a national saint of Ireland meant that it would not have been advantageous for her to be presented as a simple and meek ascetic. Instead, her biographers needed to find means of placing Brigit on a par with the more prominent national saints such as Brendan and Patrick. As a result the figure of Brigit needed to engage with the world in such a way that would have allowed her to build alliances

and make friends with both secular and religious figures, and through that they could reflect a friendship between their respective institutions and cults.

Of course, Christianity brought with it a set of pre-existing ideas about women, their bodies, and their souls. These complex views about women mixed with local and community ideas, created a set of unique localised views on gender. After exploring the position of women in western Christendom, we will then examine how Christian ideas about women took root in Ireland and mixed with local ideas, traditions, and prejudices. Finally, this chapter examines how being a woman affected the personality of Brigit as she survived in the texts. As we shall see, she was not able to interact with kings and others in the same aggressive manner as male saints in Ireland. Rather, she was placed into a more pliant and kindly role, but a role that was still able to become a national and powerful figure within Ireland

Women in the Latin West

It goes without saying that saints, at least physically, were either male or female. However, as we shall see, early Christian writings saw women as weaker and more vulnerable to sin, creating a problem for early hagiographers. Bender argues that the biographers dealt with this problem by creating a sort of third gender whose members were still depicted as women, but who were spiritually on equal grounds with men (1997: 179). However, Harlow has put a more convincing argument forth. She theorised that all women, indeed, all Christian people, were expected to try to achieve holiness (1997: 172). Additionally, no matter how holy a woman might become, she was still a woman and still posed a threat to men. Indeed,

such thinking can be seen in the Céili Dé text *The Monastery of Tallaght*, when Saint Samthann squeezes a tiny drop of fluid from her cheek, and even this is enough to indicate that there was a potential for lust. As a result she advised Máel Rúain not to associate with women.⁹⁰ As a result we are left with a new gender that was not equal to men, but rather an idealised vision of women who were still shackled within at least some of the constraints of their gender (Harlow 1997: 173). Indeed, it is the rejection of feminine ways that makes them the ideal models for women, and more specifically, female saintliness. As these women rejected the feminine, they then began to move closer to the masculine albeit without them actually becoming anatomically male. This allowed them to achieve an ideal, namely being in the liminal state of being women, but winning freedom from the traditional weakness of their gender (Johnston 1995: 211). Harrington supports this position, and also points out that woman saints in Ireland were often praised for what were considered to be the positive female traits, such as humility and beauty (1997: 199).

Indeed, we find such an example of this in the poem *Broccán's Hymn*, itself a short metrical biography of Brigit, which begins by giving a description of Brigit by praising her, not for what she is, but what she is not:

Nirbu ecnaire, nirbu elc
 Ni bu cair banchath brígach,
 Ni bu nathir bémnech brecc
 Ni rir macc De ar díbad

Ni pu for seotu santach
 Érnais cen neim cen mathim:
 Nirbu chalad cessachtach
 Ni cair in domuin cathim⁹¹

⁹⁰ This passage will be dealt with in greater detail later in this chapter.

⁹¹ She was not slanderous (?) * she was not mischievous / vehement women's fights were not beloved by her / she was not a stinging spotted snake / she did not sell God's son for riches // she was not greedy for riches / she gave without resentment, without hesitation. / she was not hard or stingy / she

Carey, in his prologue to his translation of this poem points out that this poem is specifically pointing out that Brigit did not conform to many of the negative stereotypes of women in Early Ireland (1998: 163). Indeed, this can be seen in *The Instructions of King Cormac* (28-35) which refer to women as being, *santach*,⁹² *écndach*,⁹³ *cédschtach*,⁹⁴ and *elc*⁹⁵ as well as referring to them as *nathraig*.⁹⁶ In other words, the text is clearly interested in that Brigit does not have the negative traits associated with women. However, as we shall see, Brigit still does have many of the positive traits of women.

Harlow goes on to focus on how these women perpetuated the gender divide through their rejection of their own sex (1997: 175). However, this is beyond the focus of this thesis. A more useful approach for this thesis is taken by Jo Ann McNamara, who examines the general role that women play in society through their suffering (1991). By examining the role that suffering plays in the lives of female saints, McNamara points out that these women often acted to put a human face on the political life of their male secular counterparts. While men were able to play an active role in political life, women were often reduced to passive positions of support and praise for their husband (McNamara 1991: 199). As one possible way to support their spouses, women used sanctity and charity to gain support from the poor and politically weak members of society. One famous example of this would be

did not love enjoyment of worldliness.; *for *ernaic*, I have followed Carey's lead and translated it as *écndach*, meaning slanderous (1999: 164).

⁹² *DIL*: greedy

⁹³ *DIL*: slanderous

⁹⁴ *DIL*: stingy

⁹⁵ *DIL*: mischievous

⁹⁶ *DIL*: serpents

Radegund, who had been given lavish gifts to compensate for the beatings that she regularly received from the hand of her husband, Clothar. Rather than hoard these goods, she gave them to the poor or ascetics in the woods. Even after fleeing from him, he continued to give her goods, which she continued to use to support those in need, as well as to develop her own nunnery (*Radegund* §§10-11). Indeed, as we shall see, Brigit is no exception to this broader phenomenon, and her ability to give is used by her biographers to promote the interests of her cult and her paruchia. Additionally, we shall see that she is placed not as the humane face of a secular king, but rather as the humane face of her saintly counterpart, namely Saint Patrick.

For the purposes of this chapter however, a good place to begin with gender would be with the Hippocratic writers. Hippocratic medicine in general is an extremely complex field, and Hippocratic gynaecology is no exception to that. What is given here is an extremely cursory study of this field.⁹⁷ These authors viewed women as being fundamentally different to men (King 1994: 106). Continuing from Aristotle's view that men were warmer and therefore more perfect, the Hippocratic writers slightly modified this view and came to see women as moister, rather than cooler, than men. As a result of this women had bodies that were seen as being softer and spongier than men's, and needed to menstruate to release the unused moisture. If they were not menstruating, their moisture should either have been producing a child or providing milk to feed that child with (King 1994: 107). Additionally, the fact that a woman who was older would stop menstruating was believed to be due to the fact that ageing was seen as a drying process. Once sufficiently dried out, a woman who has reached menopause no longer needed to menstruate (King 1994: 108). Indeed,

one Hippocratic author points out that if the younger woman was not producing menstrual fluid, milk, or a child, then problems could result:

And when the body of a woman – whose flesh is soft – happens to be full of blood and if that blood does not go off from her body, pain occurs, whenever her flesh is full and becomes heated If the existing surplus of blood should go off, no pain results from the blood.

(*P. Antiopolis 184: Hippocrates, Diseases of Women: 572*)

While the exact cures for gynaecological problems are beyond the scope of this chapter, it should be kept in mind that the Hippocratic view of sexual intercourse was that it was healthy for a woman's body. It was believed that by keeping the womb moist and in the proper position, sex contributed towards the general health of the woman (King 1994: 108). Indeed, Monica Green points out that the first piece of gynaecological advice that should be given to virgins, according to the Hippocratic text 'The Diseases of Women', was to advise them to marry, and thus to lose their virginity (1985: 20).

One of the most influential medical thinkers on the early Middle Ages, at least in the west, was Soranus of Ephesus. A member of a school of thinkers called the methodists, he believed that the body had only three conditions, lax, constricted, or a combination of either of these two (Green 1985: 24). He saw the woman as fundamentally similar to the man, without the distinctions of hot, cold, moist, and dry that the Hippocratics used. Rather the female was to be treated in a similar manner, and the organs that separated women from men could be treated with the same set of general principles (Green 1985: 27). Menstruation was the result of the domestic and sedentary lifestyle that women led, and the menstrual fluids carried out the excesses from their bodies which men would shed by perspiring during athletics and physical

⁹⁷ For more in depth studies see King (1994) and Green (1985).

labour (Green 1985: 28). Green then goes on to argue that women who led masculine and active lifestyles often stopped menstruating (1985: 30).

While menstruation may have been unhealthy, the excess in the body that caused it was still regarded as a necessary component for conception (Green 1985: 29). Soranus believed that the ideal state for a woman's own health was not to be so excessive as to need to menstruate. Additionally, sex was not regarded as a healthy action. Unfortunately, we only have a passage in Soranus's *Gynaecology* that refers to his now lost *On Hygiene* for a fuller explanation of why he thought this was so:

And among women we see that those who, on account of regulations and service to the gods, have renounced intercourse and those who have been kept in virginity as ordained by law are less susceptible to disease.

(Soranus: 29)

Indeed, in the Middle Ages, there was a great emphasis on virginity; it can come as little surprise that Soranus was such an influential thinker on gynaecological issues in the west.

Joyce Salisbury points out that the church fathers did not have a unified view of the woman's body, although they did all share a view that women were a cause of lust and sin (1986: 279-80). Additionally, Teresa Shaw has shown that there was a unified view amongst early church writers that excesses of food led to excess of humours and therefore imbalance within the body, and that the balance could be maintained by fasting (1998: 235).⁹⁸ Unfortunately, by the Middle Ages confusion about human, and in particular female, anatomy continued to persist. In spite of common references to both Hippocratic writers, as well as Soranus, most of the

⁹⁸ For a description of the views of the Early Christian thinkers on fasting and the body see Shaw (1998: 235-244).

corpus of medical texts are little more than collections of recipes in an encyclopaedic format. These collections contained little information on human, let alone female, physiology (Green 1985: 168-70). Indeed, Irish medical texts were not so different, although the emphasis was less on medicinal recipes, and more on diagnosis, bone setting and nursing (Davies 1989: 50-52). As a result we must look to other sources for an understanding of women.

Women in Early Ireland

In Irish hagiography it seems that there was a perceived link between the body and sin; a notion likely to have been gained from the writings of the church fathers. The notion that moisture was what caused women to be more prone to the temptations of the flesh is also prevalent in Ireland, possibly arriving with the new faith (Bray 1999: 176). In Irish hagiography Saint Samthann emphasises this in a rather complex exchange with Máel Rúain. She first sent a messenger to ask the cleric if he heard confessions from women and if he would accept her as an *anmcharae*.⁹⁹ Upon hearing the news, Máel Rúain gave thanks to God, and told the messenger to ask Samthann for her counsel. Her response was, to say the least, interesting:

Gabaisi iarum ind crecht eitir a dí mer 7 fecais for a fáscud rée mór 7 nicontaldad banna as. Asendad iarom dolduid bannan bec bec as lasind fascad fottai. Banna bec son de usci 7 robúi buidetai bec fair do caomclod a datha. Dobertsom for a hingin iarum in dibúrsin mbic sin. Asbertsí tra airt bés iarum olsí a cutrumesi do súg inda curpsom ni be mundteras indda taobatu dó fri banscala.

(MT §61)¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ *DIL*: Soul-friend

¹⁰⁰ She then took the wound [which she had inflicted in her cheek] between her two fingers and began to squeeze it for a great time, and not a drop was wrung from it. Then because of the length of the

The fact that it was the amount of fluid in his body that Samthann used as a basis for her instructions to Máel Rúain to avoid all women indicated that the fluid was the source, or at least an indicator of the danger women would pose to him. In this case, of course, it was based upon his own weakness and the amount of fluid in his body. The most obvious cause of concern in this case would have been in the form of the lust and temptation that women would stir in him. Indeed, that fluid was the cause is noted in an earlier paragraph in the *MT*:

Aos dunat foibdi a tolæ bes la coibsenugud no imradad tantum no
la oitid. Abstinit dedirn doa traothad fobithin is foimmad fola inda cuirp
ised adrali. Andand fofeiscren iarum ind fuil is and fofeiscren ind tol 7
an accobar
(*MT* §59)¹⁰¹

However, women were not necessarily trapped in this life of sin. The way in which women would be able to overcome this weakness would be through celibacy and rejection of the physical (Harlow 1997: 171). If this rejection was complete enough, a woman could transcend the weakness of her gender and achieve manliness and sanctity. Indeed, Jerome argued that as long as the bodies of women were for birth and child rearing, she was ‘as different from man as body is from soul.’ However, if serving Christ was more important to her, she could effectively transcend the body and become as a man (*PL* 26.567).

In other words, women have the additional obstacle of having a body that is charged with giving birth. We have seen above that there was consensus that the

squeezing, a little tiny drop came out; it was a small drop of water, and there was a slight yellow on the surface. Enough to change the colour. She put on her nail, then, this little tiny drop. She spoke then, ‘As long as there is, then’ she said, ‘an equivalent amount of juice in his body, he should not give either friendship or confidence unto women.’

excess fluid that indicated, or was possibly even the source of, a woman's supposed weakness was also what made a woman's body capable of giving birth. In overcoming this weakness, women become more like men, their bodies would be less full with the excesses of this world and thus would be better able to serve Christ and the church. As a result of this triumph they would come nearer to sanctity. Indeed, Jerome expressed this view when he praised his friend Paula for having the 'manly courage' to cross the desert and learn from the desert fathers (Jerome *Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae*: 164-76[§§7-14]). Indeed, Ireland was no exception to this broader view, looking again to the MT, §60 tells the story of Molaise of Daiminis' sister named Copar who lusted after men. Molaise put her on a fast, which did not work. At the end of the year, Copar continued to lust, and blood came from her when Molaise pricked her with a needle. After three years of reduced diet Copar no longer lusted or bled when pricked or cut. However, the risk of relapsing into sin was not eliminated, and Molaise instructed her to remain on the diet for the remainder of her life. Only by eliminating the excesses in her body was Copar able to overcome her lust for men; when, after three years of struggle, the excess fluid in her body was gone, so was her sinful nature.

Often this conflict of the flesh with the spirit took on gruesome proportions. A person is trapped with the physical body, and therefore one possible way to overcome the body during life is by rejecting the flesh through torture and asceticism. For example, Radegund, whose examples of rejection of flesh are numerous, included pressing a burning brass cross against her skin (*Radegund* §26), and

¹⁰¹ A person whose desires are active, whether it be by hearing confessions, or simply thinking about it, or youthful passion. Strict abstinence is needed to calm them because of the abundance of blood in the body that causes it. After that, when the blood level has dropped, then lust and desire also drop.

prostrating herself in a cold privy so that she would be numb when she was to engage in intercourse with her husband Clothar (*Radegund* §5). It was accepted that these extreme acts of self immolation were a means of understanding the suffering of God through the human senses (Robertson 1991: 269). Harlow has argued that women had to discard many of the supposed attributes of femininity. These included material things, such as elaborate dress and jewellery, as well as emotional states, such as vanity, fragility, and light-mindedness (Harlow 1997: 170). Because these attributes were considered to have come from the body, and that the female body was weaker, saintly women often denigrated their body to the point that they stopped menstruating (Harlow 1997: 170). Sometimes it would also result in cross-dressing. In the *Acts of Paul*, Paul converted Thecla, after which Thecla began to dress like a man (II 7- 43, esp. 25, 40). It seems that she is dressing in this fashion to avoid the amorous advances of figures such as Alexander, whose spurned love for Thecla causes him to cast her to the lions (II.26-28). However, this fear only began to take place after she began to believe, and immediately preceding this in (II.25), Thecla cut her hair off indicating a change in sexual attitudes and sexuality and therefore a greater elimination of her femininity. In other words, Thecla had considerably more to lose once she had converted. The potential of being a victim of assault only became a matter of concern, at least according to the author of the text, once she had embraced her new faith and transcended the weakness of her gender

While the suffering of torture and asceticism was one of the most direct means of understanding God during this Earthly life, women could also abandon life, and thus the conflict between body and soul, and become martyrs. Shortly before she was martyred, Saint Perpetua had a dream that she was a male athlete whom Christ

was training in order that she might fight against the devil. In other words, in being willing to die, Perpetua had abandoned the flesh and taken on the form of her more manly soul, and thus be less afraid to abandon the material world (*Martyrdom of Perpetua*: §10). Bray points out that martyrdom was the ultimate victory for women over the physical world (1999: 178). This was true for men as well, but given the limited numbers of female saints, it would seem likely that this was a more difficult achievement for them. Martyrs, both male and female, are now spiritual beings who have strong faith, utter chastity, and have overcome their fear of pain and death to abandon the conflict between flesh and spirit (Bray 1999: 178). For the woman, whose flesh was seen as a source of her weakness, this was an accomplished and rare achievement.

Women had a long history in the Irish church. As early as the writings of Patrick, we find that they were becoming active either by abandoning their parents for a life of asceticism over marriage or becoming continent in their marriages: ‘...filii Scotorum et filiae regulorum monachi et virgines Christi esse videntur?’ (*Conf.* §41).¹⁰² Once the church was established, we find that nuns were given a special place amongst women. In the laws, nuns, unlike secular women, are not considered to be incompetent, and are even allowed to give evidence against a cleric (*CIH* 2197.5-6). The *Second Synod of Patrick* divides the holy into three categories, the hundred fold including bishops and teachers, the sixty fold including clergy, widows, and the continent, and the thirty fold, who are the lay folk who believe (*Second Synod of Patrick*: §18; cf. Mat. 13:23 and Mar 4:8). Ní Dhonnchadha points

¹⁰² ... sons and daughters of Irish underkings are seen to be monks and virgins of Christ? (Hood 1978: 50)

out that the hundred fold in this source was probably intended to include virgins, since it is the only category not to include women (1994-95: 72-74). We also find in the letters of Jerome and other early church fathers that there was a three-fold categorisation of women into *virgines*, *penitentes*, and those in *legitima matrimonia* (PL 51). We do not know the exact number or location of women's houses. Many of these pre-Norman nunneries were small and probably short-lived. As a result, they were quickly dissolved or became incorporated into the larger male communities.

Male saints often do not have much fondness for women. Bray gives a very precise list of male saints who avoided female contact. This includes a young Brendan who whipped a girl for trying to play with him (*VSH*: 101 [§5]), Ciarán of Cluain was only willing to look at the feet of the princess whom he was instructing (*VSH*: 210-11 [§16]), and Molua fled all women, to the extent that even sheep were to be avoided on the grounds that:

ubi enim fuerit ovis, ibi erit mulier, et ubi erit mulier, ibi peccatum, ubi vero peccatum, ibi erit dyabolus, et ubi dyabolus ibi infernus est
(*Salmanticensis*, 137 §32)¹⁰³

This was not true for all saints.¹⁰⁴ The Irish saints were described as being divided into three generations, the earliest of these, which was headed by and contemporary with Saint Patrick, were so holy that they did not feel temptation and therefore welcomed women. Although the text does not specify that the same applied for female saints, it would seem logical that the same would apply for holy women of this generation of women in welcoming the presence of men. It was only

¹⁰³ where there will have been sheep, there will be women, and where there will be women, there will be transgression; truly, where there is transgression, there will be the devil, and where there is the devil, there will be Hell.

¹⁰⁴ For a more complete listing see Bray (1999: 176).

as the later second and third generations became less holy that they needed to shun the company of women (*Salmanticensis* 81-3). It is worth noting that the second generation included, amongst others: Columba, Brendan, and Ciarán.

Bitel argues that, unfortunately, the hagiographers do not tell us what virtues were considered to be male and which were female (1986: 28). Of course, it should be pointed out that she does not consider the possibility that there was no distinction between male and female virtues. However, when we enter the realms of miracles, it becomes clear that there were differences. Quite obviously, men could not perform certain miracles. A good example of this is to be found when Ita prayed for and received the Christ child so that she might nurse him. Bray makes the interesting point that this incident, which even inspired a modern lullaby, drew no comparison of Itá to Mary (1987: 211). In one particular instance, Ailbe notices a nun miraculously milking a stag for a sister who was ill. While there seems to be a somewhat humorous element to this passage, Ailbe is nevertheless humiliated into attempting to perform the same miracle by his retinue. Fortunately for Ailbe he escapes from this ordeal when an angel comes to reprimand him saying: 'Minima miracula feminis relinque, et illa aspicere noli, feminarum enim propria sunt' (*Salmanticensis* 129).¹⁰⁵ Whether the passage was humorous or not, these 'Minima miracula' obviously belong properly to the domain of women. As we shall see, most of Brigit's miracles centre around the hearth, home and other small scale miracles, and there are certainly no episodes that compare to Patrick's encounter with Lóegaire at Tara, or Columba's encounter with Bruide in Pictland. For the most part, Brigit is happy to confine most

¹⁰⁵ Abandon the little miracles to women, and do not aspire to them, for they are the property of women.

of her miracles to domestic issues, such as healing, abundance of food, and maintaining and protecting the livestock. A similar pattern can be seen in other Irish female saints lives, but it must be kept in mind that many of these texts are patterned after the Brigidine *vitae*.

Of course, it has been shown repeatedly that the perception of gender is a construction developed by a specific society at a specific time or as Kristeva puts it, 'The maternal body is the module of biosocial programming.' (1997: 305) Medieval Irish society was no exception to this type of programming. Once again, we find that gender is constructed from a male point of view and is therefore unreliable as a source for an accurate depiction of the issues and feelings that were a part of real women's lives. That said, there are sources that allow us to understand what the relationship between men and women might have been; of course, this is especially true when looking at this relationship from the male point of view.

Saint Brigit as a Woman

Kelly has pointed out that the lines between men's work and women's work are not always clear (1997: 448). However, women were still expected to do a large share of the work, as expressed in the *Cáin Lánamna*, which states that women were expected to be hard workers (*CIH* ii 515.6-8). Much of this work would have probably stemmed from the fact that cattle raids, wars, and politics probably would have demanded much of the man's time. The male head of the household would have been expected to be able to represent the interests of his family and much of his work would have involved politicking with other men at the *airecht*, where he would

have been performing legal acts and ratifying contracts. Paterson argues that if he were not engaged in politics, he would often be fulfilling military obligations outside the home (1994: 308). While obviously he would still have to spend a considerable amount of time at home, his frequent absence would have put a great burden on the wife to manage the house and farm. Indeed, about the only roles exclusively confined to the men seem to have been within the political and military realms. Paterson convincingly argues that the only way the man would have been able to fulfil these roles adequately would have been if he could have counted on someone else to manage the home and its labour supply, a likely candidate for this role would have been his wife (1994: 305-07). Of course, this is not to say that the woman did all the work. It is probable that among the free classes there would have been slaves in the household (Kelly 1997: 438-445), in addition, children and other relatives within the home could often be expected to do much of the work. However, this work was done under the supervision of the wife (Paterson 1994: 305).

That said, there does seem to be some indication in the legal texts that there were jobs that were considered to be the domain of men. These tasks include the collection and splitting of wood (*CIH* i.82.6) as well as construction, for instance building of fences, fortifications, and roads.¹⁰⁶ However, even these forms of labour are relatively remote from the actual house and home. Kelly points out that, in the legal texts, men seem to have a major role in the sowing, harvesting, threshing, and drying of cereals.¹⁰⁷ Given the enormity of the task, he certainly did not do this job

¹⁰⁶ For further examples see Paterson (1994: 307).

¹⁰⁷ For further examples see Kelly (1997: 450).

single-handedly; *Bethu Brigitte* §39 indicates that it was the norm for a family to work the field together:

Alius vir solus laborans in boceto fuit, cui sancta ait cur solus laboraret. Qui ait:

‘Tota familia mea in dolore est’.

Audiens hoc benedixit aquam, 7 .xii. infirmos fammiliae illius continua sanavit.¹⁰⁸

A man or a woman could do grinding, however, men did the grinding in a water mill while women would be expected to use a hand quern (Kelly 1997: 450). Given the role as manager of the house, it is not surprising that woman had the responsibility for most of the cooking with the grain and flour, with the notable exception of brewing beer, which seems usually to have been part of the man’s domain (Kelly 1997: 450). Nevertheless, we find that in §28 of the *Bethu Brigitte*, the nunnery discovered that a bishop was coming to visit. In spite of a shortage of time, the nuns were hoping to be able to brew some beer in time. Fortunately, Brigit miraculously turned the water they were intending to use into the beer, allowing the nuns to make better preparations for the bishop’s imminent arrival. While this might just be due to the fact that monastic women usually avoided men, the fact that the passage gives no indication that it was exceptional for women to be brewing shows that there was at least some flexibility in the profession. In comparison, we do not find any examples of women practising smithcraft. Despite the fact that the goddess Brigit was described by Bishop Cormac as the patron of smiths (*Cormac’s Glossary*: §150), neither Saint Brigit nor her nuns ever took part in smithing. While this may have been a deliberate attempt by the Brigidine authors at keeping the saint distinct

¹⁰⁸ Another man was working alone in a cow pasture, whom the saint asked why he worked alone. He said: ‘All my household has been taken ill’. Upon hearing this, she blessed water and instantly healed twelve sick members of his family.

from the Brigit of the pagan past, I have yet to find any female smiths in either the hagiographical or saga literature.

The woman's role in early Ireland, was, as we have seen, basically that of a household manager. She played a central role in child rearing, taking care of the sick, and feeding the household (*CIH* ii.509.1-3), while for higher-ranking women, there was also an emphasis on needlework, embroidery and weaving (Kelly 1997: 451).¹⁰⁹ Women also played a major role in dairying, although if there were enough kine it probably would have taken more than one person (Paterson 1991: 305-06). The *Míadslechtæ* expresses prejudice against freemen who herd cattle. A *Bógeltach* or cow grazer was not entitled to honour price (*díre*) or free status (*soíre*) because it was seen as work for women and children (*CIH* ii 585.16). In addition to this, we can get a sense of the division from the *Cáin Lánamna* (*CIH* ii 509, 1-3). This text specifies that in a divorce of a marriage of joint property the wife got one sixth of the wool, one third of the combed wool, and one half of the cloth. Such partition might give some indication of the degree of work that the wife might have put into each of these processes.¹¹⁰

In addition to comparisons with secular women, we must remember that Brigit was also a saint, and needs to be seen in relation to other Irish saintly women. Indeed, these women were often compared to Brigit within their *vitæ*. Sometimes this comparison is fairly obvious, as when Saint Ita (*VSH* ii 130 §36) and Saint Monenna (*Salmanticensis*: 84 §4) are both independently called 'secunda Brigita'. Bray makes a case that even though Ita does not have many parallel miracles with

¹⁰⁹ For more examples see Kelly (1997: 451 note 91).

¹¹⁰ The role of the women in the household was an important one, but it cannot be discussed in depth here. For a more detailed analysis see Kelly (1997: 448-451) and Paterson (1994:305-08).

Brigit, describing these saints as a second Brigit indicates to the audience that the *vita* of Ita, is to be seen as associated with Brigit (1989: 28). Although Bray does not specifically mention Monenna, she too was described as a second Brigit indicating that we can include her as being seen in conjunction with our saint. Other examples of Brigidine parallels in Irish female hagiography include Samthann's face glowing on her wedding night and her tongue of fire before her wedding ceremony so that she may avoid marriage; this suggests a similarity to the numerous miracles of Brigit as a child not being hurt by fire. This comparison is even more obvious when made with Ita who appeared to be in a burning house as a child, but it turned out to be her face glowing brightly (Bray 1985-86: 79). Dorothy Bray has recently examined the figure of Monenna, and found many similarities with Brigit; they were both legendary miracle workers living at roughly the same time, both were abbesses of monasteries¹¹¹ and both have some mythological roots (Bray 1999: 170).¹¹² There are, however, several differences between Monenna and Brigit. First, Monenna is a much more rigorous ascetic than Brigit, and at least in the *Salmanticensis* text, there is a much greater emphasis on Monenna's virginity. This is not to say that Brigit was not a virgin, but in §14 of the *vita*, Monenna is described as never looking directly at a man, and that she would only go out veiled in case she met a man (Bray 1999: 170-73).¹¹³ Brigit, being of the earlier and therefore holier generation of saints, never shows any difficulty in associating with men. There is never any indication that she struggles with lust, and when men lust after her, she readily knows how to deal with

¹¹¹ Brigit was the abbess of Kildare, while Cú Chu (*AU* †517 or 519) was the abbess of Kileevy

¹¹² It should be pointed out that Bray argues that Cú Chu's mythological roots are not as strong as Brigit's (1999: 170).

¹¹³ In the appendix to her 1999 article Dorothy Bray includes a useful index of parallel motifs in the lives of Brigit and Monenna: pp. 179-180.

the problem, even if the results are as drastic as the removal her own eye (*Bethu Brigitte* §15, *Vita I* §19). However, in the *Vita I* §43 we find an example of a man whose wife did not wish to have sex with him, indeed, the text clearly states she hated the man. Brigit gave him some holy water to sprinkle on his bed while the wife was away: ‘Et ex illa die uxor dilexit maritum nimio amore quamdiu uixit’ (*Vita I* 21. 24-25).¹¹⁴

Another interesting aspect of the Irish lives is that the women are rarely compared to Mary. We have seen that Brigit is referred to in §11 of the *Bethu Brigitte* in the following manner “‘Haec est Maria quae inter vos habitat’”,¹¹⁵ and is called a kind of Mary in §15 of the *Vita I*. Furthermore, in *Ultán’s Hymn*, Brigit is referred to as ‘in máthir Ísu.’ (*Ultán’s Hymn* 325)¹¹⁶ This is comparable to the strongly Marian image of Ita who nursed the Christ child.¹¹⁷ However, these comparisons are limited. Although Brigit wears the label of being the ‘local’ Mary, the comparison is limited to this reference. However, the Marian image of Ita nursing Christ never actually draws a direct comparison from mediaeval commentators. Indeed, the Marian cult only seems to have begun to have an impact shortly before the Norman invasion, and while she has always been a popular figure, it is only in the last 150 years that Mary began to become the important figure that typifies the Irish church today (MacCurtain 1980: 541). However, this does not mean that Mary was not a figure in early Irish devotion. Indeed, Michael O’Carroll has recently pointed out that the figure of Mary appears in numerous early Irish texts, as well as on St. Cuthbert’s coffin made in Lindisfarne, St. Martin’s cross on Iona, as well as in the Book of Kells (2000: 181).

¹¹⁴ And from that day the wife loved the husband mightily for as long as she lived [§43]

¹¹⁵ “Here is the Mary who will live amongst you (the Irish)”

¹¹⁶ the mother of Jesus

Bray points out that with the image of Mary being available to early Irish hagiographers, however minimal it may have been, it would seem that they used it to maximise the Christian aspects of Brigit while clearly helping to remove her from the pagan past (1989: 32).

In addition to establishing her as a clearly Christian figure, the authors are also establishing Brigit as a sort of redeeming figure as well. Gail Streete points out that numerous church fathers saw Mary as a redemptive figure (1999: 348). In the Latin west, Ambrose wrote that Mary ‘worked the salvation of the world...[for] the redemption of all’ (*Ambrose Ep* 49.2 [brackets mine]), and Irenaeus stated that Mary, through her virginity ‘was alone when she effected the salvation of the world and conceived the Redemption of the Universe.’ (*Isernaeus* XXII.4) Central to this idea, is the image of an ideal woman whose obedience to God allowed for the redemption of herself and in the case of Mary, the entire world (Streete 1999: 352). While the theological nuances of Mary as a redemptrix lie beyond the scope of this thesis, it is sufficient to say that the equation of Brigit with Mary would place Brigit in a redemptive role in Ireland. This is especially true given her partnership with Patrick. In the Old Irish *Tripartite Life of Patrick*, Patrick gains the right to judge the Irish on Judgement day after considerable bargaining with the Lord (*The Tripartite Life of Patrick* 114.9-120.9). While there is no clear equivalence in the actual Brigidine *vitae*, we do seem to find reference to Brigit as a redeemer in the poetry. An example of this can be seen at the end of *Broccán’s Hymn*, where we find the following stanza:

¹¹⁷ For a more complete analysis of Íte breast feeding the Christ child see Bray (2000: 293-296).

Ademunemar mo Brigti
 rop imdegail diar cuire.
 conasna frim a hérlam
 asroillem téram huile.
 (*Broccán's Hymn*: ii: 349 li.99-100)¹¹⁸

Indeed, this aspect is made even stronger at the end of the poem, which ends with the following stanza:

Fail dí chaillig i rrichid
 nicosnágur dom díchill
 Maire ocus sanct Brigit
 For a fóessam dún díb linaib.
 (*Broccán's Hymn*: ii: 349 li.105-106)¹¹⁹

It is worth noting that John Carey argues that these final stanzas may well not be the work of the original author of the Hymn. Three stanzas before this one, we find a dúnad, an echo of the first stanza of the poem, with the line, 'Victorious Brigit did not love the world.' The remaining stanzas may be part of the original poem, a later addition, or an independent poem that was mixed with *Broccán's Hymn* (1998:178). Clearly here we find an example of Brigit being identified both as an agent of deliverance as well as being identified with Mary. The need to position Patrick as a judge of the Irish would have protected Patrick from being usurped by his redeeming partner.

Such a high status for a female was exceptional, and, as we have seen, throughout most of western hagiography women need to abandon the female flesh in order to make their soul more masculine and thus holy. However, Brigit does not undergo any of the rigorous asceticism that might serve to make her masculine in the eyes of traditional Christian cosmology. Instead she seems to have a masculine

¹¹⁸ I appeal to my Brigit / May she be a protection to our group / Let her patronage help me / May we all be deserving of deliverance.

nature before she is even born. While Dubthach and Broicsech are riding in a chariot a druid hears them approach and mistakenly believes that a king is approaching (*Vita I* §2). When he discovers who is in the chariot he realises that Broicsech is with child, furthermore, he foresees that the child will become extraordinary and that the children that Dubthach has had with his wife will serve this child. Johnston argues that in this encounter the mother of the saint has taken the role of the sovereignty goddess, and the saint the role of the king (1995: 207). However, Johnston fails to take into account the fact that the druid is only concerned with the child in the womb. He needs to ask if the bondmaid is pregnant, indicating that it is only the child she is carrying that is special. Nothing about the woman herself indicates to the druid that she special or in some way different. If the woman had not been pregnant, there is no reason to assume that the druid would have been particularly concerned with her. An example of this can be found in *The Adventure of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedón*; Torna the poet discovers Níall as a new-born on the green of Tara. While he saves the child, Torna makes no effort, either before or after the birth, to rescue Cairenn, Níall's mother, from the brutality of Mongfind, Níall's father's wife. It is up to Níall, much as it is up to Brigit, to rescue his mother from her unfortunate position (*The Adventure of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedón* §§2-3).

Additionally, the goddess aspect of Broicsech would have been lost when, shortly after this encounter on the road, Mel and Melchú come to Dubthach's house. While visiting him they instruct his wife to love the slave woman as though she were a son on the grounds that the child who is being carried will bring benefits to both

¹¹⁹ There are two nuns in heaven / They do not cause me to fear their abandonment / Mary and Saint Brigit / Let us be under the protection of them both.

herself and her own offspring (*Vita I* §4). There are any number of relationships that the bishops could have advised Dubthach's wife to use as a measure by which to love Broicsech, such as sister, daughter, or cousin. If Dubthach's wife was to love Broicsech as she might love a son, she would have been indirectly acknowledging Brigit as a descendent. In addition to this, the reshaping of the relationship into one that is defined by masculine roles, the author is also casting Brigit's mother into a masculine role, assuring a minimal feminine presence in her birth. In having two parents both of whom were assuming masculine roles, Brigit's own masculinity is increased. Through this process, there was no female inheritance and Brigit's sanctity is further assured.

Later in life, Brigit took on the traditionally masculine role of bishop. While she was still seen as an abbess and a woman, the role that she takes on is clearly one that would normally be associated with a man. Her success in becoming a bishop in the *Bethu Brigitte* was immediately seen as an exception, and Mel points out that 'Haec sola ... ordinationem episcopalem in Hibernia tenebit virgo' (*Bethu Brigitte* §19).¹²⁰ The author goes on to stress that Brigit, in spite of being a bishop, would still require a priest to perform sacerdotal functions. This occurs in §41 of the *Bethu Brigitte* and §40 of the *Vita I* after Brigit converted a pagan, but needed to summon a priest to baptise the man and his household. It is interesting to note that the ordination of Brigit is not included in the earlier Latin lives, indicating that it was a later development. Indeed, The Middle Irish *Betha Bhrigdi* in the *Book of Lismore* implies that successors of Brigit at Kildare are still bishops:

¹²⁰ This virgin alone in Ireland will hold the episcopal ordination

Is edh doralá ann tria grása in Spirto Nóibh gradh nesbuic do eirleghiunn for Brigit. As-bert Mac Caille nar' bho ord gradh nespuic for bannscail. Adubhairt espoc Mel: 'Ni leam a commus. O Dhia doratad in anoir-sin do Brigit seoch cach mbannscail', conidh anoir espuic doberat fir Eirenn do comarba Brigitte o sin ille. (§40)¹²¹

Additionally, Johnston points out that Conláed's importance in the later texts declined as the need for a bishop of Kildare was fulfilled by the successors of Brigit (1995: 213). It was not until 1152 at the synod of Kells-Mellifont that the abbess of Kildare lost her Episcopal status (Johnston 1995: 216).

Even after her death Brigit continued to compete successfully with men in the masculine fields. The most notable example is to be found in *Cath Almaine*, which is recorded in the *Fragmentary Annals* and the *AU*, which documents the battle as having occurred in 722. In this battle, the Laigin were successfully able to defeat the Uí Néill in spite of being heavily outnumbered. Shortly before the battle Brigit appeared above the Laigin while Columba appeared above the Uí Néill, implying that Brigit played a role in the victory for the Laigin. Such an appearance above an army before battle may appear similar to the Irish goddesses such as the Badb, Bé Néit and Nemain, who appear over the Connachta while shrieking and scaring the soldiers the night before they were to lose the final battle in the *TBC* (*TBC I* 121.4033). However, Brigit appears more as a defender of the army. It should also be noted that Columba appears above the Uí Néill army, but without the successful outcome that Brigit enjoys (Johnston 1995: 219). We can be fairly certain that the monks would not have been eager to draw comparisons between Saint Brigit and any of the pagan war goddesses.

¹²¹ It came then to pass through the grace of the Holy Spirit the grade of bishop was read over Brigit. Mac Caille said the level of bishop should not be given to a woman. Bishop Mel gave bequeathed it to

By altering the role, and having her be a protector, she is able to usurp this role from the Mórrígan and Badb, while not drawing direct comparison. In addition, by being literally on the side of the field that she favours, she would make a more comforting figure than a horrifying bird hovering above enemy, which frightens them to death. However, war was seen as a masculine pastime, and as a nobleman we might expect that Columba would have excelled at it. Certainly women who participated in war, the most famous example of which being Medb, received heavy criticism for it:

‘Is básad’ ol Fergus, ‘do cach graig remité lár rotgata, rotbrata,
rotfeither a moín hi tóin mná misrairleastair.’
(*TBC I*. 4123-24)¹²²

However, it is Brigit whose side won the battle, affirming her masculine nature. Johnston may have been pushing her point by describing Brigit as a combination of ‘the figure of the warrior woman with that of the transvestite saint’ (1995: 219-220). Brigit is highly successful in the field of battle, just as she is in supporting her cult’s political ambitions. However, her role is not one of a terrifying shrieking bird, nor is she actively involved in the actual battle. Instead her role is protective; as the patron of Leinster, she fulfills her duties by protecting the armies of Leinster.

her: ‘I do not have the power. God gave the rank to Brigit, beyond every woman’, therefore from that time the men of Ireland give the honour of a bishop to the successor of Brigit.

¹²² ‘This is what happens’, said Fergus, ‘to each stud of horses preceded by a mare. Their wealth is taken, and carried away, and defended as they follow a woman who is misleading them.’

Conclusion

In spite of a masculine spirit, Brigit remains a woman. While these aspects, such as appearing above a warring army, or even being a bishop, are aspects of masculinity, she still remains a female figure. Indeed, although she was consecrated as a bishop she still could not perform sacerdotal functions, and although she manifested above an army, she did not play a direct hands-on role in the battle. Rather, she remained as a guardian of the army of Leinster; this was a protective role that allowed the Laigin to defeat the Uí Néill armies defended by Columba. While the poets and biographers constantly give Brigit praise, her most positive traits lay not in what she was, but in what she was not.

Irish saga literature is remarkable for the numerous women with striking and powerful personalities. Figures like the Morrígan and Medb are memorable, if not entirely pleasant figures, whose dominance and presence belittle many of the men around themselves. Such a show of dominance would not have been acceptable behaviour for a Christian saint. However, possibly as a result of influence from Irish sources, Brigit avoids the rigid asceticism and meek deference of many of her continental counterparts. Brigit is a powerful and prestigious woman in her own right, but she is still constrained by the expectations put on women that belong to her society and religion.

Throughout her life Brigit was able to deal with and interact with men, and was one of the most powerful figures in the perceived history of Ireland. Her coarbs at Kildare were, likewise, some of the most powerful women in Ireland until much later. Brigit was an exceptional and ideal woman. However, she was still a woman, no matter how holy or powerful. As a result she, or rather her authors, created means

of allowing her to compete and be an important figure in the male dominated world of the early Irish church. In particular, she needed to establish a friendly, but not entirely submissive relationship with Patrick and his bishops, as well as other powerful men in early Irish society. We shall see in forthcoming chapters, her domain is to be found in the 'minima miracula' of other female saints. As we shall see in future chapters her ability to manipulate the potlatch system of gift giving and wealth would allow her to gain a position of prominence in Ireland.

Chapter 3

Saint Patrick and Saint Brigit

Introduction

Patrick played an important role in both the history and the hagiography of Ireland. His writings constitute some of the earliest historical documentation of Ireland that we have. In the first section of this thesis we have debated the historical significance of Patrick and the role that he may or may not have played in the conversion of Ireland. One thing we cannot doubt about Patrick was that he was one of the most important figures in the literature and hagiography of the Early Irish church. He figures prominently in many texts, many of them outside of hagiography and was the patron of one of the most powerful federations in Ireland.

The reason for this pre-eminence was that Patrick was widely accepted as the apostle of the Irish, and his federation used this fact to promote the claims of their foundation (De Paor 1971: 102). While Swift has pointed out that Tírechán also claimed a church in Co. Mayo as one of the two head churches of the Patrician federation (Tírechán 14.6, Swift 1994: 68), Armagh, through a lengthy process of political climbing became head of the Patrician cult and of the churches of Ireland. As we shall see, Kildare engaged in a similar process, indeed, Kildare's political situation was seemingly politically more advantageous, as it was located in Leinster near Dún Ailinne, the political centre of the powerful Uí Dúnlainge. McCone and others have argued for a conflict between Armagh and Kildare, which was resolved in the *Liber Angeli*, which gave Leinster to Kildare, and the rest of Ireland to the

Patrician federation. However, as we shall see, the claims to national control put forth in the early texts seems to have been a standard motif in early Irish hagiography, and indeed, these claims continue in texts after the supposed agreement had been established.

As a female saint, Brigit, or more accurately her cult, was not in a position to compete directly with the cults of male saints. Her image, although this is by no means an exclusively female one, was to be a humble servant of God. It is only when male saints can be made to admit to her greater holiness, or when that holiness is revealed through divine intervention, that she is able to assert herself, and thus her communities' claims to an extended *paruchia*. However, these themes do not seem to occur in her engagements with Patrick in the literature. Often, the two are placed on equal footing, albeit sometimes with Patrick shown as the holier of the two saints.

However, Patrick was associated with and represented by a number of bishops, many of whom encountered Brigit as well. In these situations, Brigit is unfailingly shown as being holier than the bishop, or at least acting as a mentor to the bishop in question. This is not to say that Brigit orders and commands these bishops. Her humble status remains, as is appropriate to a saint, but she is shown to be holier than figures such as Mel and MacCaille, as well as guiding and assisting figures such as Brón and Erc. This would seem to indicate that her position was eclipsed only by Patrick, even within the Patrician cult. Even the male bishop who was associated with Kildare, namely Conláed, is placed in a secondary position to Brigit.

Armagh and Kildare

If we are to understand the depiction of the relationship between Patrick and Brigit, then the relationship between Armagh and Kildare is a crucial one to understand. The arguments surrounding this issue stem from two different sources. The first is the seemingly competing claims put forth by Cogitosus and Tírechán that their respective monasteries, and the federations that they headed (cf. Swift 1994) can claim control over all of Ireland as their *paruchia*. The second of these is the apparent claim put forth in the *Liber Angeli* that Patrick would control all of Ireland except Leinster, which would remain under the control of Brigit. It has generally been assumed that there was an agreement put forth some time between the writings of Cogitosus, Muirchú and Tírechán and the *Liber Angeli* (McCone 1982: 107-08, De Paor 1971: 101, Bieler 1961: 255-56). It is believed that this agreement is simply that Kildare would surrender its claims outside of Leinster and in return Armagh would recognise Kildare's claim to Leinster.

As we shall see in this chapter, in all cases, the literary encounters between Brigit and Patrick such as those in the *Vita I* and *Bethu Brigitte* are friendly and there is no evidence for any animosity between the two saints or their federations. Often in the Patrician texts, there is a co-operative spirit between the two. In the Old Irish *Tripartite Life*, Patrick preached for three days although it only seemed like one hour. During the sermon Brigit went against etiquette and fell asleep. Patrick allowed this, for he realised that she was having an important dream. When she awoke she described a long dream, the most important feature of which being two stones in a rain shower. The smaller one grew and sparkled in the shower, while the larger one wasted away. Patrick recognised these two stones as the sons of Eochaid mac

Crimthainn, one of whom believed and was blessed, the other of whom did not believe and was therefore cursed (*The Tripartite Life of St. Patrick* 176: 9-26). As we shall see in greater detail, the Brigidine texts that mention Patrick usually praise the bishop and often, albeit not always, they present him as superior to Brigit. Cogitosus, Muirchú, and Tírechán, in spite of making claims to a vast *paruchia*, do not mention any encounters between the two saints. However, Ultán and Ailerán, who, as we have seen, wrote lives of Saint Brigit that lie behind large portions of the *Vita I*, also were recorded in *The Tripartite Life of Saint Patrick*¹²³ as having written lives of Patrick as well (*The Tripartite Life of Saint Patrick* 60). By the late seventh or early eighth century, we find in the *Liber Angeli* that the relationship between Brigit and Patrick is described in friendly terms:

Inter sanctum Patricium Hibernensium Brigitamque columpnas amicitia caritatis inerat tanta, ut unum cor consiliumque haberent unum. Christus per illum illamque uirtutes multas peregit. Vir ergo sanctus Christianae uirgini ait: ‘O mea Brigita, paruchia tua in prouincia tua apud reputabitur monarchiam tuam, in parte autem orientali et occidentali dominatu in meo erit.
(*Liber Angeli* [XI 3] (32))¹²⁴

This friendly relationship is also shown in *Ultán's Hymn*, which records that Brigit was ‘Lethcholbe flatho la Patricc prímdé’ (*Ultán's Hymn* 326: 9).¹²⁵

It is likely that part of the reason that Kildare took a subordinate yet friendly position in relation to Armagh was because by the seventh century Kildare had not been able to achieve the powerful position that Armagh had achieved. By the time of

¹²³ Mulchrone pointed out that this text was written during the reign of Cenn Gegán, king of Cashel 895-901 (1939: i).

¹²⁴ Between holy Patrick and Brigit, columns of the Irish, there was a great friendship of charity, that they had one heart and one counsel, Christ, through him and her, worked many miracles. Therefore, the holy man said to the Christian virgin, ‘O my Brigit, your paruchia in your province nearby, will be thought of as your dominion, however, in the western and eastern parts it will be in my domination.

¹²⁵ One of the two pillars of the kingdom with Patrick the pre-eminent.

the writing of our texts, the Uí Dúnlainge, upon whom Kildare was dependent for political power, were not in a position to hope to be more than the rulers of Leinster while the Uí Néill were well placed in the north to aim for wider dominion (McCone 1982: 138). Kildare's ambitions had been weakened when the Southern Uí Néill took the southern Midlands from the Laigin in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. However, Mac Shamhráin has recently argued, through a thorough examination of *The Annals of the Four Masters*, that the Laigin were still actively fighting in this area into the early seventh centuries (1996: 61). This would have placed a large part of the heartland of the Brigidine cult between the Laigin and the Southern Uí Néill, with different portions of it resting in the control of one of the two groupings. Such a dilemma would have wrecked any ambitions that Kildare may have had to national episcopal control over Ireland (McCone 1982: 139). This created the awkward situation that there was a large population of people who were spiritually loyal to Brigit but living in an area dominated by people loyal to Armagh and Patrick. In order to maintain peace, at least within the church, it could easily be assumed that some sort of arrangements must have been made.

Indeed, such an arrangement would have been made easier to live with by the fact that in the late seventh century, peace overtures were attempted between the Laigin and the Síl nÁedo Sláine. Smyth argues that in 633, Conall Guthbind of Clann Cholmáin allied himself with the Uí Dúnlainge (Smyth 1974: 508). This benefited Clann Cholmáin in their disputes with Síl nÁedo Sláine over the kingship of Tara, while assisting the Uí Dúnlainge in their efforts against the Uí Máil, a group

that was a consistent rival to the Uí Dúnlainge,¹²⁶ over control of Leinster. Of course, it probably would have been natural for the Síl nÁedo Sláine and Uí Máil to make a similar arrangement so that they might be able to rival the powerful alliance of the Clann Cholmáin and Uí Dúnlainge. Indeed, Mac Shamhráin points out that Cellach Cúalann, was made king of the Uí Máil after his father, Fíanamail mac Máele-tuili, was killed as the result of his defeat by the Uí Néill in 677. Cellach wisely chose a different path for external relations from his father and married a daughter of king Sechnassach mac Bláithmeic of the Síl nÁedo Sláine (1996: 66-67). In addition, his own daughters were married to high king Fínsnechta Fledach and Írgalach of North Brega. Of course, such a diplomatic king would have tried to gain as much support as possible, and we find that yet another daughter was married to Murchad mac Brain, a king of the Uí Dúnlainge (Mac Shamhráin 1996: 67). Indeed, Byrne makes the argument that relations between the Laigin and the Uí Néill were mostly peaceful in the eighth century, mostly due to Clann Cholmáin's desire to produce a friendly neighbour to assist in their conflict with the Síl nÁedo Sláine (Byrne 1974: 154). Their joint rise to power during this period was accompanied by a lack of conflict between the two groups. Domnall Midi (*AU* †763) never attacked the Uí Dúnlainge during his twenty year reign. Indeed, neither did his successor to the high kingship, Niall Frossach of the Cenél nÉogain, whose even temperament may well, according to Byrne, have been a factor in his decision to abdicate to join a monastery in 770 (*AU* †778) (1974: 156-57). While this period of peace was not to

¹²⁶ For a more detailed discussion of relations between the Uí Dúnlainge and the Uí Mail see Mac Shamhráin (1996: 70-73).

last, it certainly would have created an environment whereby peaceful relations were fostered between the Uí Néill and the Laigin.

In the first section of this thesis we have seen that by the mid-seventh century the older churches of Ireland are beginning to assert their seniority and air their grievances with the younger churches. It is roughly at this time that we begin to see the earliest flourishing of hagiography, such as the *Vita II* by Cogitosus as well as the *Liber Angeli* (De Paor 1971: 100).¹²⁷ In the earliest of these texts, we see Cogitosus, Tírechán, and Muirchú attempting to claim that their patron's *paruchia* extended over all of Ireland. It is often assumed that the *Liber Angeli* is the reconciliation of this supposed conflict (McCone 1982: 107-08, De Paor 1971: 101, Bieler 1961: 255-56). However, the ninth century *Bethu Brigte* does not seem to relinquish any of the claims outside of Leinster. At roughly the same time, the *Tripartite Life* states that Patrick appointed Fiacc of Sletty to the bishopric of Leinster, which would not indicate that Armagh was respectful of the primacy of Kildare within Leinster (*Rawl. B.512* fo.7 a.2, Etchingham 1993: 150).

As we have seen, the texts that were written before the supposed agreement, or at least the ones that bring Patrick and Brigit together, always present both in a friendly light. It is also worth reminding ourselves that the sections in the *Vita I* that bring the two together are based on the earlier *vita* by Ultán (§§ 43-95), who often acts to bring Armagh and Kildare together, and even writes that Brigit referred to herself as Patrick's handmaid (*Vita I* §53; McCone 1982: 141). The *Liber Angeli* is central to understanding the difficulties of the various texts. The text itself dates from some time between the mid-seventh and the early eighth centuries (Sharpe

1984b: 62; Bieler 1962: 252-53; De Paor 1971: 101). We have seen that the relationship between the two saints was described in exceptionally friendly terms, with the two saints dividing Ireland between them (*Liber Angeli* [XI 3] (32)). McCone sees this passage as evidence of an agreement between Armagh and Kildare that they will respect each other's *paruchia* in the areas described (1982: 107-08). This belief is supported by the seventh century verse *Ultán's Hymn*, which records that Brigit was one of the 'two pillars of the kingdom' along with Patrick (*Ultán's Hymn* 326: line 9). A marginal note to this text explains and redefines this situation in greater detail:

‘amal bíte da cholba i ndomun sic Brigit ocus Patraic i nHerenn
... .i.ereghda .i. ar mar bad colba ic roind taige sic roroi[n] Brigit 7
Patraic flathius Herend inter se conid hi as cen[d] do mnaib Erend,
patraic immorro as chend d’eraib’.
(*Ultán's Hymn* 326)¹²⁸

According to Davies, *Ultán's Hymn* dates from the seventh century (1999: 31). Intriguingly the text itself is attributed to Ultán, Columcille, Broccán, ‘the three of Brigit’, and Brendan (*Ultán's Hymn* 323-325).

Etchingham throws doubt on this contract by pointing out that it might not reflect a true pact, but just Armagh's point of view regarding the political situation at the time of writing some time in the seventh to ninth centuries (Etchingham 1993: 150). However, after these co-operative statements were made, there does seem to be a claim made that would contradict the situation described in the *Liber Angeli*. For example, in the *Tripartite Life* it is stated

¹²⁷ See Section 1 Chapters 4-5.

¹²⁸ ‘as there are two columns in the world, such it is with Brigit and Patrick in Ireland... i.e. distinguished i.e. for it was like a pillar dividing a house, so Brigit and Patrick have divided the sovereignty of Ireland between them so that she is the head of the women of Ireland, Patrick, however, is the head of the men’

that Patrick appointed Fiacc of Sletty to be the bishop of Leinster (*The Tripartite Life of Patrick* 194. 4-7). Of course, it should be remembered that ‘mi domine Aido’ mentioned in the preface of Muirchú’s work is, according to Bieler, most likely to be bishop Áed of Sletty, who incorporated his church into the Armagh paruchia (1979: 1). Additionally, the *Bethu Brigte* continues in the ninth century to claim all of Connacht as well as other churches throughout Ireland:

As-bert iarum ind ingen da focul fris:
 ‘Meum erit hoc, meum erit hoc’.
 Ni tuc dano amnair in druid a n-í-sin.
 ‘Rel dun’, ol suide frisin drúid, ‘ar ní tucaim-si’.
 ‘Nípu failteu de em’, ol in drui, ‘Is ed em at-rubart’, ol in drui,
 ‘bid lee in mennut-sa co laa mbratha’.
 (*Bethu Brigte* §4)¹²⁹

In other words we see what appear to be a variety of claims being made while the literary figures of Brigit and Patrick, and presumably therefore Kildare and Armagh, retain their friendly relationship.

This leads us to the work by Cogitosus, which claims for Brigit the position of supremacy over all the churches in Ireland. That Cogitosus makes such a claim during the relative chaos of seeming claim and counterclaim should not be surprising. Furthermore, we have seen in the first section of this thesis that he was writing a piece of advertising,¹³⁰ presumably with the intention of bringing pilgrims or prospective monastics to Kildare. Unfortunately, we do not know the exact mechanisms by which these claims were advanced once written in the lives.

¹²⁹ The girl then said to him repeatedly: ‘This will be mine. This will be mine.’ However, the maternal uncle of the druid did not understand what that was. ‘Make clear to us,’ he said to the druid, ‘since I do not understand it.’ ‘You will not be joyful from it,’ said the druid. ‘It is this which she has said,’ said the druid: ‘the breadth of this place will be with her until the day of judgement.’

However, we have seen that we can be certain that Tírechán was familiar with the *Vita II*, given his reference to Cogitosus in his prologue, indicating that the text had achieved at least some popularity in Ireland. Especially notable in his work is the fact that while Tírechán criticises other saint's cults, notably the cult of Columba, he does not attempt to directly dispute any claims by Kildare. Whatever the methods used to advance the claims made in the hagiography may have been, the *Vita II* seems to be primarily concerned with describing and praising the monastery at Kildare. Because of his bias, any claims that Cogitosus makes should be treated with some suspicion, or at least consideration of what his motives may have been. In addition, while there can not be any doubt that Cogitosus does claim all of Ireland as Brigit's *paruchia* in the prologue of his work, he later carefully describes Brigit as 'beatissima puellarum principalis' (*Vita II* Prologue)¹³¹ and her *paruchia* as 'cathedra episcopalis et puellaris' (*Vita II* Prologue)¹³². While this might not be a retraction of his claims, Cogitosus certainly does seem to be tempering his claims to national priority made only a few lines earlier in the prologue.

Given that Brigit and Patrick were described in *Ultán's Hymn* and *Liber Angeli* as being exceptionally close, even to the point of being called joint 'pillars of the kingdom' (*Ultán's Hymn* 326: line 9), it would not have been much of an exaggeration to claim that Kildare, which seems to have effectively shared the claim, was the principal see of Ireland by Cogitosus, who was seeking to advertise his own monastery. If they were truly seen as being joint pillars, either *paruchia* could claim individually to be the head of the church in Ireland without offending the other,

¹³⁰ See Section 1 Chapter 6

¹³¹ blessed head of women

¹³² episcopal and womanly see

which could easily account for variety of claims being made. This would have been especially true in light of the upstart monastic centres that were threatening to usurp the rights of the older churches. It seems then that one possible scenario for the political structure of ecclesiastical Ireland was that Armagh and Kildare were claiming joint sovereignty, but that, Kildare's area of actual control was limited to Leinster. Such a reality of jurisdiction would allow the *vitae* of both saints to be claiming national authority, while other texts, notably the *Liber Angeli*, seem to be describing a co-operative agreement between the two churches.¹³³

St. Patrick

Of course, crucial to an understanding of how the relationship between the respective cults of the saints developed is an understanding of their relationship in the hagiography. Probably the most important figure in the Brigidine lives, with the exception of Brigit herself, is Saint Patrick. The two figures encounter each other on numerous occasions and are consistently friendly towards each other, with Brigit playing a consistently subordinate role to Patrick. We have seen in the first section of this thesis how medieval Irish *vitae* are seemingly, or sometimes even explicitly, laying claim to various churches and monastic sites for their *paruchia* throughout Ireland. In addition, I have argued that central to an understanding of relations between Armagh, the seat of the coarbs of Patrick, and Kildare is that they should be seen as two co-operative centres rather than two opposing ones.

¹³³ A similar idea seems to have occurred to King Edwin of Northumbria, who proposed a system whereby Canterbury appointed the bishops of York and York appointed the bishops of Canterbury. Unfortunately, he died before such plans could be enacted. For more information see Brooks (1984: 64-65).

We have seen earlier in the chapter that the relationship of the two saints as hagiographical figures within the text must be read against these apparently opposing claims of Armagh and Kildare. Specifically, it is the friendly nature of the relationship between Saint Brigit and Saint Patrick in the *vitae* that is noteworthy. While it has seemed to many scholars that these large universal claims that were being made were the result of both churches attempting to claim to be the head church in Ireland, I have argued that it would make more sense that the seeming contradictory claims to national status should be read against the seemingly friendly relations both in other parts of the hagiography, as well as in other texts such as the *Liber Angeli* and *Ultán's Hymn*. If I am right about this, it would seem that the relationship between the two centres was friendlier than it has previously been considered to be, and that any claim to national primacy would not necessarily contradict the claims of the other church. In order to support this argument, I pointed out that the Patrician texts are obviously flattering to Saint Patrick and show him in a superior light to most other Christian figures. Such consistency is not to be found in the Brigidine texts where Patrick is often depicted as the greater of these two saints.

Having established that female saints were constrained by the weaknesses associated with their gender, we must be careful not to assume that virgins were less holy, indeed, it is clearly stated that they were of the same class of holiness as important men of the church. Its earliest precedent is from the parable of the sower: 'Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.' (Matthew 13: 8, Mark 4: 8) It can be seen expressed in Irish terms in the *Liber Angeli*:

In ista uero urbe Alti Machae homines Christiani utriusque
sexus relegiossi ab initio fidei hucusque pene inseparabiliter
commorari uidentur, cui uero praedictae tres ordines adherent uirgines
et poenitentes (et) in matrimonio legitimo aeclessiae seruientes.
(*Liber Angeli* [XI I] (15))¹³⁴

Within this threefold scheme, virgin nuns were placed at the top of the scale, equalled by only bishops and virgin monks (Harrington 1997: 22). Similarly in the law tracts, holy virgins were given a special status above ordinary women: specifically, they were excluded from legal incompetence. This is seen in the *Hibernensis* which exempts virgins and heiresses from legal incompetence:

Non est dignus fidejussor fieri servus, nec peregrinus, nec brutus,
nec monachus, nisi imperante abbate, nec filius, nisi imperante patre. nec
femina, nisi domina. virgo sancta.
(*CCH* xxxiv.3)¹³⁵

We have seen in the previous chapter that in order to achieve sanctity women needed to overcome the weaknesses associated with their gender. It has been demonstrated that although Brigit never achieved the level of transexualism that female saints achieved in the later middle ages she was accorded some of the status normally ascribed to men such as being ordained as a bishop. I refer to those later female saints with beards, or those whose lives were spent without anyone realising that who they believed to be a man was in fact a woman and so forth. Despite the limitations put on Brigit due to her gender, it is worth remembering that the saint did come to be regarded in the literature as the equal or superior of many of her male colleagues. This is in spite of the fact that the saint did not become fully manly, or to

¹³⁴ Indeed, in this city of Armagh Christian people of both sexes are seen to live together, virtually inseparably, from the coming of the faith until the present to this aforementioned city contains three orders: virgins and penitents, and those who serve the church in legitimate matrimony

¹³⁵ Market slaves are not worthy as jurors, neither are foreigners, nor imbeciles, nor monks, (unless ordered by the abbot) nor sons, (unless ordered by their father), nor women (except an heiress or holy virgin).

put it another way, she did not become, for lack of a better term ‘macho’. She does not smash any druid against a rock in a similar manner to Patrick at Tara (Muirchú 18 (17)-20(19)), or cause any heathens to burst into flames. Furthermore, she is described by her male hagiographers as being physically beautiful (*Bethu Brigte* §15). Brigit, as the most highly placed ecclesiastical woman in the hagiographical literature did not need to be “butch” in a manner similar to her male colleagues. She simply needed to overcome the weaknesses of her flesh. Of course, this still made life difficult for female saints, and the authors of the *vitae* needed to find other ways to promote the status of the saint without betraying her female virtues.

An example of how this can be achieved is to be seen at the end of the appendix of the *Bethu Brigte* (*Bethu Brigte* Appendix §6).¹³⁶ After Brigit and Brendan meet after a sea monster calls upon Brigit to ward off another sea monster, which is attacking Brendan’s ship, the seafaring saint vowed to visit the holy woman.¹³⁷ Saint Brendan was to become one of the most famous literary figures of medieval Europe due to the popularity of the *Navigatio*, a tale of his adventures at sea. One of the cult of Brendan’s major monastic sites was in Clonfert, part of Connachta, on the border of Munster and Leinster (Farmer 1965: 11). Unfortunately, sources for the early political history of Munster are lacking and research into this area is sorely needed; this is in spite of rich Latin scholarship from this region (Ó Cróinín 1995: 57). The Brendan cult was one of the “upstart” churches, possibly affiliated with the Columban federation that was competing with Armagh and Kildare. Having Clonfert, with its location in Connachta near Kildare, as its head

¹³⁶ See also the notes to *Broccán’s Hymn* (335.44-46, 336.1-40).

¹³⁷ These miracles seem to be based upon a series of glosses of *Broccán’s Hymn*. For more see Carey (1998)

church may have placed the Brendan cult in direct competition with Kildare and the Brigidine cult.

This friction is reflected in the above-mentioned passage. As stated, one monster is attacking his boat, while another is defending it. As part of its defence, the second monster begins to pray to all the saints of Ireland including Patrick and Brendan, who is present. However, the first monster only stops its attack when Brigit is invoked. Because of this, Brendan went to meet Brigit at Domnach Mór, which is north of Kildare, and which would have conveniently place this episode between Kildare and Clonfert. They then returned to Kildare, where Brigit hung her cloak on a sunbeam. Brendan's boy attempted to do the same thing twice, dropping the cloak each time, before Brendan came and placed the cloak on the sunbeam himself. After that, Brigit and Brendan began to speak, with Brendan informing her that he regularly thinks of God: 'niro-chingiusa .vii. n-imairi riam cen mo chuimne a nDia' (*Bethu Brigte* Appendix §6).¹³⁸ Brigit praised him for this, but informs him that since she has put her mind onto God, she has never taken her mind off of Him. Brendan then praised Brigit, saying: 'Ni hingnad dona bíastaib muiridhi ... gé no-moltas sec cách int-í isa fognam sin.' (*Bethu Brigte* Appendix §6),¹³⁹ thus affirming the holier position of Brigit over Brendan.

The literary relationship between Patrick and Brigit needs to be understood as a result of their acting as agents representing the needs and interests of their cults, as well as the result of the representative genders. Part of the nature of their relationship is that between an abbess to a bishop. While this is obviously a worthwhile avenue

¹³⁸ I have never crossed seven ridges (wave-crests?) without my mind turning to God.

¹³⁹ It is no wonder that the monsters of the sea might praise more than anyone the one who gives that service.

to explore, it must also be kept in mind that Brigit was said to have been consecrated as a bishop.

Ibi episcopus Dei gratia inebreatus non cognovit quid in libro suo cantavit. In gradum *enim* episcopi ordinis Brigitam.

‘Haec sola’, inquit Mel, ‘ordinationem episcopalem in Hibernia tenebit virgo’.

Quandiu igitur consecraretur columna ignea de v[e]rtice eius ascendebat.

(*Bethu Brigitte* §19)¹⁴⁰

This was obviously recognised by the author as being an exception. Even Mel recognised the exceptional nature of this moment by stating that she, alone among women, would hold the ordination of bishop. This passage was the basis for the abbess of Kildare claiming to be the sole female bishop in Ireland, until 1152 at the synod of Kells-Mellifont, when the abbess was stripped of her status (Johnston 1995: 216). The title of *coarb of Brigit* was associated with the abbess rather than with the abbot until this date. Harrington argues that the importance of the abbess of Kildare can be seen in the rate at which their obits were recorded in the annals (1997: 165). Indeed, the *Annals of Ulster* report obits of only seven bishops and superiors of Kildare as opposed to the obits of fifteen abbesses. Indeed, almost all obits in the *AU* are, or seem to be, of important people, however we cannot know if the higher frequency of mentions of the abbess are the result of their greater importance than the bishops or simply the possibility that holders of that position suffered more frequent deaths.

¹⁴⁰ ‘The bishop [Mac Caille], drunk with God’s grace, did not realise what it was that he chanted in his book. He ordained Brigit in the order of a bishop. Mel said ‘This is the only virgin who will hold the ordination of Bishop in Ireland.’ Then, when she was being consecrated, a fiery column arose from her head.’ While it was Mac Caille who ordained Brigit in the *Bethu Brigitte*, in the *Vita I* §20 it was Mel who ordained while Mac Caille watched.

In spite of her gender, Brigit achieved an exceptionally high status in Ireland. Even though she was elevated to the bishopric, Brigit was consistently portrayed as behaving in a subordinate manner to Patrick. In §39 of the *Vita I* and §40 of the *Bethu Brigitte* a woman accuses Brón, one of Patrick's bishops, of fathering her child. There are slight variants between the two versions. In the *Vita I*, Brigit asks permission from Patrick to find out who has performed the miracle, while in the *Bethu Brigitte* Patrick hides away because Brigit will not perform miracles in his presence. Furthermore, in the *Vita I* the miracle ends when the woman simply repents for what she has done, while in the *Bethu Brigitte* the crowd wants to burn the woman, but Brigit convinces the crowd not to kill the woman and as a result, the sinful woman repents. In each of these passages Brigit shows a level of humility by refusing to perform miracles either in the presence of Patrick or without his permission.

The vernacular text does put Brigit in a slightly more powerful light than the *Vita I*. In the *Vita I*, Brigit has to ask to perform the miracle, while in the *Bethu Brigitte*, Patrick was forced to remain behind while the bishops seek out Brigit because Brigit would not perform miracles in his presence. While this is still Brigit being humble before Patrick, she is still depicted as the active agent in making the decision. However, Patrick enters the assembly once Brigit has caused the tongue of the woman to swell up and preventing her from speaking. Patrick is present both when Brigit causes the unborn foetus to reveal its father, and when Brigit instructs the crowd to let the woman do penance rather than burn her. Nagy has recently argued that through his absence Patrick increases his own authority in the Old Irish text (1997: 231-32), however, in this case Patrick's return is what seems to lend his

weight to the miracle. It is not clear whether Brigit is aware that Patrick has returned, and he returns only once Brigit has successfully stopped the woman from lying, and he has decided that the miracle has been completed. Once our saint begins to deal with issues that are not exclusive to her, he returns, only then beginning to lend weight to her actions. Nagy claims that the fact that Patrick needs to be absent so that Brigit's humility would not prevent her from performing the miracle indicates that Patrick is the greater of the two saints, while promoting the interests of Brigit as well (1997: 231-32). Indeed, the image of Patrick lending tacit support to Brigit's humane decision making would seem to support Nagy's claim even further.

However, Patrick too was capable of offering a sympathetic judgement. In §57 of the *Vita I* some men stole some of Brigit's horses as well as the corn from a home nearby. Through God's grace, they arrived back at Brigit's residence, which they had mistaken for their home. When the man whose corn had been stolen arrived at Brigit's residence, they found the thieves asleep in a small hut. In response to this Patrick was sent for. He came and released the thieves, who then repented. Those from whom the corn had been stolen left their corn with Brigit on the grounds that God had delivered it to her. What is noticeable here is that Patrick, who struggled to judge the pregnant woman, had no difficulty in dealing with these thieves, indicating that Patrick had greater control in this situation. Possibly Patrick's ability to adjudicate in this situation was because of his gender; the thieves in this case were, unlike the expectant mother, men, placing them in the jurisdiction of Patrick, whereas Brigit was better able to judge against a pregnant woman who had sinned.

The next chapter in both the *Vita I* (§40) and *Bethu Brigitte* (§41) is the story of a pagan countryman who invites Brigit to consecrate his new house. Brigit goes, but soon realises that the man has not converted to Christianity:

‘...nam ille prae cunctis sancto Patricio et suis discipulis ualde resistit et baptizari rennuit.’ Tunc Brigita dixit ad illum: ‘Non possumus cibos tuos comedere nisi prius baptizatus fueris.’ Tunc a Deo compunctus credidit cum omni domo sua et baptizatus est ab episcopo Broon, discipulo Patricii.
(*Vita I* 19. 25-28, 20.1-2)¹⁴¹

This passage contains a clear and consistent narrative up to this point. Furthermore, it shows Brigit in a positive and superior light to Patrick. Clearly it is Brigit who is able to convert pagans in the face of Patrick’s inability to do so. Additionally, while it is a disciple of Patrick who baptises the man, it is the same disciple who has been recently saved by Brigit. However, the passage goes on:

Sequenti autem die dixit Patricius ad Brigitam: ‘Ex hac die nec licet tibi ambulare sine sacerdote. Auriga tuus semper sacerdos fiat.’ Ordinauitque sacerdotem, nomine Nathfroich, et ipse in tota uita sua auriga sancte Brigitte fuit.
(*Vita I* 20.5-6)¹⁴²

While Brigit needs a priest to be with her so that the people whom she converts can be baptised, this anecdote is still an uncomfortable fit. It does not read as a flowing narrative, rather it seems like a small section that has been added on, although we cannot be certain that this is the case. Furthermore, Patrick appears from seemingly out of nowhere and begins to give orders to Brigit, which she meekly accepts. Nagy has convincingly argued that the charioteer selected to be with Brigit

¹⁴¹ ‘... for he before all greatly resisted Saint Patrick and his disciples and refused baptism.’ Then Brigit said to him: ‘We cannot eat your food unless you first become baptised.’ Then moved to compunction by God, he believed with all his house, and was baptised by Bishop Brón, a disciple of Patrick.[§40]

is a representative of no less than Patrick himself. He points out that the position of the charioteer is a powerful one, acting as a literal guide and driver for the female saint (1997: 235-36). However, the relationship between the charioteer and the person he drives is often extremely close. In *The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, Patrick's charioteer, Odrán, learns of a plot to kill Patrick. As a result he persuades Patrick to act as the charioteer, while Odrán pretends to be the bishop. As a result, Odrán is killed, and Patrick curses Foilge who dies instantly and, to make the curse even more potent, the texts states unambiguously that Foilge goes to hell (*The Tripartite Life of Patrick* 216-219). This close relationship is also mirrored in the relationship between Lóg and Cú Chulainn. While there are too many examples to cite, one of the most powerful and touching moments in their relationship is described in the *Aided Conculainn*. In this text, Lóg reluctantly agrees to drive Cú Chulainn's chariot provided the Grey of Macha agreed to go also. This is clearly an attempt to save both his own life and Cú Chulainn's life. When the steed agrees to go, Lóg goes as well, knowing that it will cost him his own life, as well as the life of his master (*Aided Conculainn* 175-76).

The closeness between the charioteer and the master is undeniable. However, it is Patrick who, in a Brigidine *vita*, is clearly ordering Brigit and placing her, albeit indirectly, under his command. While Brigit may have been more successful at dealing with individual people and guiding their spirituality, she is to be guided by Patrick or at least by his representative. By appointing a priest whom he has consecrated as her charioteer he is guiding and controlling her both in a literal sense

¹⁴² Moreover, the next day Patrick said to Brigit: 'From this day it is not allowed for you to travel without a priest. Your charioteer will always be a priest.' And he ordained a priest named Nathfroich, and he was, for all his life, Saint Brigit's charioteer. [§40]

and a figurative one. Although Brigit may be the master of the chariot, Patrick's presence and guidance is made permanent by the priestly presence of the charioteer whom he has appointed. Indeed, in the *Bethu Brigitte* it is clear that this practice continued until shortly before the Old Irish text was written. After Patrick instructs Brigit to use a priest as a charioteer, the text states: 'Idque observatum est abbaitibus Brigitae usque ad tempora propinqua.' (*Bethu Brigitte* §41)¹⁴³ However, the relationship between the charioteer and the passenger is traditionally one that implies a closeness between the servant and the master. Thus, while Brigit may be under the control of Patrick, there is an implied affinity between the two figures.

In most of the encounters between Brigit and Patrick in the *Vita I* the spirit between the two is consistently presented as one of mutual respect. In §58 a dark cloud appeared above where Patrick was preaching. The cloud, after unleashing a lightning bolt headed to Dún Lethglaisse, which was destined to be the burial place of Patrick, and disappeared. The crowd then asked Brigit what the sign meant. In an almost excessive display of equality they both attempted to yield the right to reveal the meaning of the cloud to each other:

Dixitque Brigita: 'Interrogate Patricium.' Audiens Patricius ait:
'Tu et ego equaliter scimus. Reuela eis hoc misterium.'
(*Vita I* 32.24-26)¹⁴⁴

Brigit then informed the crowd that the cloud was the spirit of Patrick visiting the places where he would be buried. She stated that his body would rest somewhere nearby before finally being buried in Dún Lethglaisse (Down Patrick, Co. Down). Patrick then instructed Brigit to make his burial shroud since he wished to be

¹⁴³ And this practice was observed by the abbesses of Brigit until recent times.

¹⁴⁴ And Brigit said: 'Ask Patrick.' Then Patrick said: 'You and I know equally as well. Reveal this mystery to them.' [§58]

resurrected in a shroud of her making. The text then tells us that Patrick was buried in Dún Lethglaisse with the shroud. This passage seems to show Patrick and Brigit as equals. They both know the meaning of the cloud; while the crowd first asks Brigit, she humbly defers the question to Patrick who in turn asks her to answer it. While it is the burial place of Patrick that is the focus of this story, he commands Brigit to make a burial shroud for him. Patrick's asking for a piece of Brigit to be present with him at the resurrection poignantly illustrates the closeness of these two saints.

The *Vita I* (§55) and *The Tripartite Life of Patrick* (p.176.9-26) share one nearly identical miracle. In the first of these miracles, set in the north of Ireland, Brigit falls asleep and has a dream while Patrick is preaching. In the *Vita I* her dream is a simple metaphor consisting of ploughmen clad in white using white oxen to plough a field, after that, black ploughmen destroy the work that the first group have completed. Patrick identifies this dream as a prophecy of the end of the world, when wicked men will undo the work that he and Brigit have done:

Nos sumus boni aratores qui iiii euangeliorum aratris, corda humana scindimus, et seminamus uerbum Dei, et lac rudis doctrine. In fine uero saeculi uenient mali doctores, malis hominibus consentientes, qui nostram doctrinam per omnia subuertent et pene omnes homines seducent.

(*Vita I* 30.24-28 - 31.1)¹⁴⁵

Two centuries later, in the *Tripartite Life*, the story remains similar. The location is given as Findabair in Lemain (Findermore Co. Tyrone), and although not explicitly stated, within the territory of the Uí Crimthainn. This time Brigit is asleep, although

¹⁴⁵ We are the good ploughers, whose ploughs are the four gospels. We cleave human hearts, and we plant the word of God, and we milk the basic teachings. Assuredly, at the end of this time, evil teachers will come, in agreement with evil men, who will subvert our teachings everywhere, and who will seduce all the men from within. [§55]

the dream has changed slightly, and gained a more political tone. In this version, there are white, speckled, and black oxen, and animals fighting each other. The dream then concludes with two stones, one of these is small, but which grows when a drop falls on it, the other one was large but wasted away with the drop. Patrick recognises these stones as the sons of Eochaid Maicc Crimthainn, one of whom, Coirbre Damargait (*AU* †514), had converted and was blessed by Patrick and one of whom, Bressal, did not convert, and was subsequently cursed by Patrick. The narrative in the Patrician text ends by stating: ‘Ruc, tra, Patraic forsinnaislingi olchennai innahi Brigti amal as nairdirc.’ (*The Tripartite Life of Patrick* 176.25-26)¹⁴⁶

It seems then that the story operates as both a general apocalyptic warning as well as a political reference to a specific group of people. Unfortunately, Bressal seems to have been so effectively cursed that I have been unable to find him anywhere in the genealogies or annals. Unfortunately, without an understanding of who Bressal was or what he did, it is virtually impossible to specify what point the authors of this miracle may or may not have been trying to make. However, the descendants of Coirbre were still major players in the Airgialla at the time of the writing of the *vitae*, and we might assume that this miracle might be emphasising that they owe their place to Patrick and Brigit, who made this prophecy. The important factor is that the same basic structure of a miracle, which we find in the both the *Vita I* and the Old Irish Patrician *Tripartite Life*, is later used to advance both the cause of Patrick and of Brigit. In both miracles Brigit falls asleep while Patrick preaches. When she awoke, she related a dream that she has had, which was similar to the first

¹⁴⁶ Patrick then understood the dream of the said Brigit, as is clear.

miracle as regards the ploughing, to Patrick, who interprets the dream. While the later Patrician text makes a specific reference to the Uí Crimthainn, it is nearly impossible to state what cause was being served, though we can say with a fair amount of certainty that both Patrick and Brigit must have gained some benefit from the telling of this miracle.

One miracle in the *Vita I* (§61) in the Brigidine texts hardly seems to have anything to do with Brigit at all. The miracle is simply that when Brigit sent word to Patrick to preach he preached for three days and nights before a man observed that the crowd had been assembled. Patrick then declared:

‘Per xl dies et noctes hic fuisset nisi ad nos aliquis extrinsecus
uenisset et nullam lassitudinem uel esuriem senserimus, diuina donante
gratia.’
(*Vita I* 34.20-23)¹⁴⁷

Curiously, aside from inviting Patrick to preach, Brigit hardly seems to play any role in this miracle at all. What exactly a miracle performed by another saint is doing in a Brigidine *vita* is unclear. Almost certainly, however, it would not be there if it were not intended to promote Brigit. The most obvious way of interpreting it in that light would be to say that by promoting the interests of Patrick, the authors are also promoting the interests of Brigit. Obviously, this only makes sense if Patrick and Brigit did share a common cause.

Finally, the *Bethu Brigitte* (§44) and *Vita I* (§42) both tell a miracle involving saints Lassar and Patrick. In both of these Lassar has prepared enough food for Brigit, but not for any others. When Patrick is seen coming towards them, Lassar begins to fret that she does not have enough food. Brigit informs her that happily the

amount of food will be sufficient, with the *Vita I* specifically having Brigit inform Lassar that the holy scriptures will suffice to make them satisfied. In the *Vita I* again, there is actually more food left over after the meal than they started with. Of course, producing copiously large feasts is a common motif in the bible, as is having more food left over than was begun with, for example the feeding of the five thousand in Mark (6:35-44, 8:1-9), as well as miracles in Matthew (15:33-39), and 2 Kings (4:42-44). In the end, Lassar gives herself and her church to Brigit who was venerated there. This is clearly an attempt for the Brigidine authors to establish a claim to Cell Laisre for their cult. Brigit provides a meal for the guests of Lassar, while in return Lassar gives over her church. Patrick's presence in this miracle would seem to give the relationship established between Lassar and Brigit an air of authority. His presence alone is the cause for the feast. His high position in society and in the church indicates that he does not need to repay anyone for the feast he has received, and indeed he does not. However, the provider of the feast, in this case Brigit, has earned the gratitude of Lassar, and with it, her foundation. Patrick's presence, in addition to providing a reason to provide a feast, also serves as validation for the deal between Brigit and Lassar.

Bishops

Even in her own *vitae*, Brigit plays second string to Patrick. She accepts his authority, yields to his will, and supports his cause. However, Brigit is not

¹⁴⁷ We would have been here for forty days and nights except for someone from outside had come and we would not have felt tiredness or hunger, due to the gift of divine grace. [§61]

subordinated to every aspect of the Patrician cult. In addition to direct interaction between Brigit and Patrick, Brigit also has numerous meetings with Patrick's bishops. The most important of these various bishops are Mel and Melchú. Ó Briain points out that it is surprising that Mel as well as Melchú, who is often little more than an associate of Mel, became associated with the Brigidine cult. This is because they are only placed in Tethba in the Patrician documents and never appear in Leinster (Ó Briain 1978: 130). As is the case with Patrick, Brigit often accepts the commands and orders of Mel. However, as we shall see, it is often Brigit who appears to be the more holy of the two figures. We have established in a previous chapter that female saints were generally expected to be more obedient than their male counterparts, and that this obedience was a sign of their holiness. In other words, Brigit's obedience to Mel serves to make Brigit a holier figure. Ultimately, God himself proves Brigit's suggested course of treatment to be the correct one.

We first meet Mel and Melchú as early as §3 of the *Vita I* when they arrive at Dubthach's house. Upon discovering that Dubthach has fathered a child with his slave, Mel tells him not to be saddened:

Partus famulae tuae praecelet te et semen tuum. Sed tamen
ancillam sicut filios tuos ama, quia progenies illius tuo semini multum
proficiet
(*Vita I* 2.16-19)¹⁴⁸

This prophecy was not to prove very accurate. Brigit was later to deny her brothers their dowry that they might have gained from her marriage and in the *Bethu Brigitte* she even cursed her brother Bacéne and his descendants, and if this were not enough,

¹⁴⁸ The offspring of your servant girl will excel you and your offspring. But nevertheless, love your servant girl as you love your sons, because her offspring will do great benefit for your offspring.; It is likely that a similar or identical episode appeared in the *Bethu Brigitte*, however, we cannot be sure due to the missing folio at the beginning of the text. (§3)

she caused his eyes to burst in his head (*Bethu Brigitte* §15). Perhaps this is because in the following paragraph Dubthach ignores Mel's advice and sells the slave woman to a druid at the prompting of his wife.

Mel is next present at the ordination of Brigit. This episode is one of the most widely varying accounts of the same episode in the texts. In the earliest of these texts, the *Vita II*, a bishop called Mac Caille officiates at the ceremony and Mel is not present (§2). By the time of the compiling of *Vita I* Mac Caille is reduced to being a disciple of Mel and Melchú, possibly this was because Mel was from the midlands, and thus held more appeal to Ultán than Mac Caille (§20). Other changes are also obvious, the *Vita II* does not mention Brigit becoming a bishop, no fire arises from her head, and although she does tear out her eye in the *Vita II*, it is not mentioned if it was restored during the ordination. One important difference is that Brigit is prompted in the *Vita I* to remain with Mel in Tethba. The *Bethu Brigitte* restores some of Mac Caille's status to him. He is still a disciple of Mel, but it is he who ordains Brigit and reads aloud the ordination for Brigit to become a bishop. This being the case, it still requires Mel's approval, which is granted when he announces, "Haec sola ... ordinationem episcopalem in Hibernia tenebit virgo." (*Bethu Brigitte* §19)¹⁴⁹ As opposed to the *Vita I*, where Brigit remains in Tethba, in the *Bethu Brigitte*, she heads out to various places in Ireland.

The next encounter of Brigit and Mel occurs in the *Bethu Brigitte*. In this episode, an unnamed and sick relative of Brigit orders his best cow to be given to his holy relation in the hope that the offering will make him well. She orders that the gift be given to Mel. However, the cow is brought back, unknown to the sick man, and

exchanged for a less valuable cow before being given to Mel. When Brigit discovers this, she predicts that wolves will eat the good cow and an additional seven oxen. To prevent this, the man sends the best cow and the seven oxen to Brigit who again orders them to be taken to Mel as payment for saying Mass during the seven days between the two Easters.¹⁵⁰ She also blesses her sick relation who is immediately cured. This episode, which occurs only in the *Bethu Brigitte*, is highly complex. As we shall see in greater depth in a later chapter, distribution of cattle and dairy, or more accurately the wealth that their sharing indicated, was used as a means of hospitality, and thus social climbing. One of the most prominent aspects of Brigit was her hospitality. In this particular case, her hospitality is not a great extreme. She is merely repaying a debt with an appropriate payment since Mel has been delivering Mass for seven days. The kine given are ‘ní mó a dán’.¹⁵¹ Brigit is only offering an equal repayment for what has been given by Mel.

§26 is only offered in an abbreviated form in the *Bethu Brigitte*. Mel orders Brigit to come with him to Tethba because there is a physician in Mide named Áed mac Bricc who will heal her of headaches. The brief miracle concludes by stating that Brigit then heals two paralytic virgins of the Fothairt. In the *Vita I* this episode begins with Brigit also experiencing extreme headaches as well as pains in her eyes (*Vita I* §29). Mel orders Brigit to him so that they can search for a doctor. Brigit does not wish for a doctor, but she obeys him anyway. While searching, Brigit falls into the ford of an unnamed river. Her blood mixes with the water and heals two

¹⁴⁹ This woman is the only virgin who will hold the episcopal ordination in Ireland.

¹⁵⁰ This would seem to date this miracle from before the time of the Paschal controversy. This passage would seem to suggest that the relation between the two dates was not just a simple either / or scenario. While such a study would be welcomed, it is beyond the reaches of this thesis.

¹⁵¹ Is not a greater gift (than the seven Masses).

mute women. When they meet the doctor they are seeking, it turns out that the cut has healed the headache. It turns out that Mel has also learned a valuable lesson from this episode, since the physician states that Brigit has seen a much better doctor than himself, and that she should only seek medical assistance through God: *Illum medicum semper quaere qui potest morbum ex te repellere (Vita I 13 5-6).*¹⁵² As a result, Mel decides never to encourage Brigit to see a doctor again: *Nequaquam iterum ego hortabor te medicum quaerere corporalem (Vita I 13 7-8).*¹⁵³

The spiritual abilities of Brigit are demonstrated in the following paragraph. Brigit goes with Mel to Tethba and at a banquet there a peasant breaks a marvellous vessel called 'the septiform cup'. The king orders the churl to be executed, and Mel cannot convince the king to change his mind. Mel takes the fragments of the vessel back to Brigit. She then asks God to restore the vessel, which is done. When the vessel is returned to the king, he releases the peasant and the text states that the fame of Saint Brigit spreads over the region. After this episode Brigit performs a number of miracles in Tethba. In §31 she rids a virgin, also named Brigit, of a demon who has resided with her due to her laziness. In §32 she curses a woman's apple trees after the woman gets angry with Brigit for distributing the apples she has given her to a group of lepers. In §33 she instructs people on how to produce a well, from which Saint Patrick later benefits. She heals four sick women in §36 as she washes their feet on Easter. Finally, in §37 she heals a mute boy by asking him to show her the kitchen of a house in which she is staying. These various miracles are then sandwiched by a miracle in which she is leaving Tethba with Mel and Melchú to visit

¹⁵² Therefore, always seek the doctor who has the power to ward off illness from you. [§29]

¹⁵³ By no means will I again exhort you to seek a doctor of the body [§29].

Patrick in Mag Breg. As they go, they pass a cleric who asks to go with them to Mag Breg. However, a large entourage weighs him down so Mel and Melchú go ahead while Brigit stays behind to comfort them. Brigit discovers that the cleric has a crippled brother and blind sister in the cart. She fasts that night and cures them with the morning dew. They proceed at a faster pace when they encounter a man who is toiling to milk his kine. He has had no help since his entire household is ill. Brigit tells her nuns to milk the cow, and the whole group feasts except for Brigit who continues to fast, which allows her to heal the household the following morning.

We do not know what the political situation in Mide was at the time of the earliest lives regarding the church and control of *paruchia*e, possibly because of a reluctance of the kings of Mide to commit themselves to one central church centre (Charles-Thomas 2000: 26). We know that Tethba was associated with Mel who was said to be a bishop of Patrick in both the Brigidine and Patrician material (Charles-Thomas 2000: 33, *Vita I* §20, *Tírechán* 6). By associating Brigit with this area the Brigidine hagiographers may have been attempting to assert a Brigidine claim to that area. However, they do not attempt to usurp Mel's authority in that area, they simply show Brigit acting with positive effect there. We have seen in the first section of this thesis that it is possible that there was a significant population belonging to the Brigidine cult there after the Uí Néill invasion of Mide and Leinster. Even if the cult had not survived there, it is likely that there had been enough of a presence there for places to be associated with Brigit. If this is the case, the lives seem to be acknowledging Patrician authority in this area since, as has been established, Brigit, in spite of her greater holiness, frequently acquiesces to the wishes of Mel. In addition, the *Bethu Brigte* reduces the episode when Brigit injures her head to a

sentence, with the emphasis being on Brigit's abilities to heal (*Bethu Brigitte* §29). The text also does not describe any of the miracles briefly mentioned above (*Vita I* §§31-37) that occur between the two encounters with Mel in Tethba. This episode possibly indicates a weakening of the Brigidine cult in this area over time.

Another important bishop of Patrick who figures in the Brigidine texts is Bishop Brón. We have seen above that in both the *Bethu Brigitte* and the *Vita I* Brón is accused of fathering a child and it is left to Brigit to sort it all out. This seems to be something of a pattern with Brón, who on two further occasions finds himself in need of Brigit to get him out of trouble. In §85 Brón and a large retinue was heading to Brigit with gifts of horses and chariots. On the way they became lost, and that night it became stormy. Because of this, Brigit prayed for them. After that, the entire retinue saw Brigit's home and Brigit coming out to greet them. They stayed there, receiving an evening of full hospitality. In the morning, the real Brigit headed out to the woods and found the band and brought them back to her home. In §86 Brón left Brigit, who had given him a chrismal, and returned to his seaside home. The chrismal was left by the sea when the tide came in. The boy who left it there began to cry. However, Brón was unperturbed and correctly predicted that Brigit's chrismal would not be lost. In all of these cases we find Brón in trouble or making an error that Brigit, either directly or indirectly has to help him out of.

While Brón is almost comic in his troubles, there is another bishop of Patrick named Erc, who also often finds himself in need of Brigit's help. However, Erc's problems often take on a much more tragic dimension. When she first goes to visit and journey with him in Munster, she asks him where his family lives. Brigit tells him that his family is fighting with one another (*Vita I* §69). Erc comments that his

family was 'in enmity' with one another when he departed, and when one of his household remonstrates against Brigit, Erc scolds him, telling him not to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. Erc then asks Brigit to let him see the battle. She then blesses his eyes in time for him to see his two blood brothers be beheaded.

In the next episode involving Erc (*Vita I* §70), we find one of the few examples where Brigit herself is caused to suffer. As they continue to journey around Munster they go to Mt. Ere. About halfway there they suffer from thirst, hunger and exhaustion. Responding to a boy's complaints Brigit sees a house preparing alms, which she predicts will come to them. The prophecy comes to fruition, and Brigit also tells them where to dig for a well. The section ends with the group praising Brigit and God. The final episode in which we encounter Erc is when he arrives at Mag Femin. He begins telling them about the miracles that Brigit has performed on their journey. They then tell Erc about an epidemic that is occurring in the area. Erc tells them that Brigit will come to them, and that the ill can be brought to Brigit for healing. Erc's prediction proves accurate and Brigit successfully heals the sick.

While episodes involving Mel and Melchú, especially Mel, may symbolise or reflect the Brigidine cult yielding power to the Patrician cult in Mide, these figures, perhaps in the face of her cult's decline in that area, allow Brigit to show her superior holiness even while obeying their orders. Indeed, it is shown that her obedience is part of what makes her holy. Brón and Erc provide contrasting examples of how the religious life is part of the suffering of life. Brón is often in trouble, but escapes with little damage to himself through the help of Brigit. Erc, on the other hand, is more tragic. He witnesses the death of his brothers with Brigit's aid, he suffers hunger and

thirst, and encounters a plague-ridden town. All of these figures work together, by showing how holy people interact with each other, to provide moral examples to the readers and hearers of the text.

One final bishop that deserves mention is Conláed, who was Brigit's Bishop. In contrast with Patrick's bishops, he is not given much mention. He is not mentioned in the Irish text, and only mentioned once, and then without mentioning his relation with Saint Brigit, in the *Vita I*. It is only Cogitosus who gives the bishop any serious treatment, and then mostly in the introduction:

‘... then she sent for Conláed, a famous man and a hermit endowed with every good disposition through whom God wrought many miracles, and calling him from the wilderness and his life of solitude, she set out to meet him, in order that he might govern the Church with her in the office of bishop and that her Churches might lack nothing as regards priestly orders.’

(*Vita II*, Intro .5)¹⁵⁴

The remaining miracles surrounding the ascetic are incidental. He is mentioned in §28 when Brigit gives away the vestments that he used while delivering services.¹⁵⁵ When Conláed needs these vestments, Brigit is able miraculously to reproduce them. Conláed is mentioned only once more in §32, which mentions that he was buried on the right side of the altar, while Brigit is buried on the left. This is a position of powerful equality with the saint for a figure who is only a marginal figure in the life of the literary figure of Brigit.

¹⁵⁴ Not in Migne

¹⁵⁵ An abbreviated form of this miracle is mentioned in the *Vita I*, which is Conláed's one appearance in that text.

Kings

One other category of powerful people whom Brigit frequently encounters are kings. Most of the encounters between Brigit and kings are reasonably friendly, and the king often praises or submits to the will of the saint. Admittedly it should be pointed out that the kings sometime bargained in order to get what they wanted from Brigit. This is especially true when Brigit was dealing with prisoners of kings. The most well known example of this is to be found in the *Vita I* §125 and *Vita II* §20. When an ignorant man killed a king's pet fox, who was skilled at tricks, in front of a crowd, the king ordered that the man be put to death and his family enslaved unless he could produce a fox that could perform similar tricks. Brigit felt sympathy for the unlearned man, and rode out to try to save him. On the way, she found a wild fox that she took with her. The king refused to listen to Brigit's pleas, so she produced the wild fox, which performed the same tricks as the dead fox had been able to perform. As a result, the king rejoiced, and released the unlearned man. Afterwards, the fox, by managing to trick everyone and evade capture, returned happily to his den. As a result everyone praised Brigit. Presumably they had realised that the fox truly was wild, and that the saint had performed a miracle in getting him to act as though he had been trained.

While the above mentioned king was made to be something of a buffoon in the story, the *Vita I* also mentions kings who reap rewards after bargaining with Brigit. We have seen in §§88-89 Brigit offers a king of Leinster eternal life, presumably in heaven, and a lineage that will be the king's in perpetuity in return for a sword for her father and the release of a prisoner who has pledged to convert and who has offered himself to Brigit. The king responds that he would prefer a long life

in this world and victory in every battle. Soon after the king finds himself outnumbered so he calls upon Brigit for assistance:

Tunc statim rex uidit sanctam Brigitam praeire ante se in pugnam
cum baculo suo in manu dextera et columna ignis ardebat de capite eius
ad caelum. Tunc hostes in fugam versi sunt; rex uero cum sua familia
gratias Deo et Brigitte egerunt.
(*Vita I* 55.16-21)¹⁵⁶

Indeed, we find in the following anecdote that Brigit kept her word even after he died, and in §89, the Uí Néill were routed in a battle when the king's corpse was present on the battlefield.

However, this does not mean that Brigit did not get involved in Uí Néill politics. In §62 of the *Vita I* the wife of the son of King Conall asked Brigit to pray for her to have a son. Brigit refused to meet with the queen, and was asked by one of her nuns:

Cur Dominum non rogas pro regina ut filium habeat cum sepe
rogas pro uxoribus plebeorum
(*Vita I* 35.2-4)¹⁵⁷

Brigit responded to this by saying that commoners were good and faithful while the sons of kings were not as worthy, but since the queen had asked in good faith, Brigit would grant her request, but with a warning:

‘Semen habebit, sed tamen sanguineum et maledicta stirpis erit et
+ multis annis regnum tenebit’; et sic fuit
(*Vita I* 35. 7-10)¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Then the king immediately saw Saint Brigit going before him into the battle, with a staff in the right hand, and a column of fire burning upwards from her head. Then the enemy were turning in flight. The king with his family truly gave thanks to God and Brigit. [§88]

¹⁵⁷ Why do you not ask God for the queen to have a son, when you often ask for the wives of commoners. [§62]

¹⁵⁸ ‘She will have offspring, but all the same, it will be a stock of blood and evil and it will not keep the kingship for many years’; and it was so. (In his translation, Picard indicates that the text is corrupt, and should include a ‘not’. I have followed his 1989 translation and included the ‘not’ in my translation.)

The queen in question is described as ‘uxor filii Conalli regis’ (Vita I 34.26).¹⁵⁹ Since Brigit is in Mag Breg, it would seem likely that the Conall mac Neill in question is Conall Cremthainne. While Conall Gulban gave rise to the Cenél Conaill in the north, Conall Cremthainne was the ancestor of the eponymous Áed Sláine and Colmán Mór of the Síl nÁedo Sláine and Clann Cholmáin respectively (See Table 3 Jaski 2000: 303). Of course, it should be noted that both of these families traced their ancestry back to Diarmait mac Cerbaill, the grandson of Conall Cremthainne (Byrne 1974: 90). The most likely child whom Brigit blessed in this miracle was Conall’s son, who was named Ardgall. Ardgall gave rise to the Cenél nArdgail, a group which Byrne rightfully points out never achieved the High Kingship and was overshadowed by the Síl nÁedo Sláine and Chann Cholmáin in the south (1974: 91).

While cursing a family line of the Uí Néill would, if effective, have given Brigit a certain amount of power in the north. A more convincing case for Brigidine activity in the north can be made on the basis of Brigit’s interactions with Conall Cremthainn for her associations with the Uí Néill. In §64 Conall approached Brigit, fearing that his brother, Cairpre, was planning to kill him. Brigit blessed him, and sent him ahead while she stayed behind. While waiting, she saw Cairpre approaching, in fear that his brother Conall was plotting to kill him, and seeking Brigit’s blessing. When the two brothers finally did meet, they did not recognise each other and embraced each other instead. Each of them went their own separate ways, and Brigit was praised by all present.

¹⁵⁹ the wife of the son of King Conall [§62]

While Brigit played the peacemaker between the two brothers, she was by no means the only saint to encounter these brothers. In *Tírechán's Collectanea Cairpre* set out to kill Patrick (*Tírechán* 9 (1)). When he failed Patrick cursed Cairpre, declaring: 'Semen tuum seruiet seminibus fratrum et non erit de semine tuo rex in aeternum...' (*Tírechán* 9 (2)).¹⁶⁰ However, in the next section, Patrick encountered Conall, who greeted him warmly. As a result Patrick granted his lineage the kingship forever provided that the sons of Conall gave alms and paid dues to Patrick's descendants (*Tírechán* 10). Patrick's "prediction" seems to be based on the fact that the descendants of Conall did gain hegemony over the Southern Uí Néill. In 544 (*AU*) Tuathal Máelgarb was killed, allowing Diarmait mac Cerbaill (*AU* †565) to gain control over the Southern Uí Néill. As a result the descendants of his son Áed Sláine, the Síl nÁedo Sláine became the dominant power of the region until Cináed mac Írgalaig died in 728 (*AU*).

Although Patrick was openly hostile to Cairpre, Brigit protected him. However, this should not be taken to mean that Brigit was a supporter. We have seen that this section was authored by Ultán, who was concerned with Brigit's role in the north. While Brigit played a peacemaker role, it is clear from §65 that her allegiance was to Conall. In this episode, Conall and his followers approach Brigit wearing 'stigmatibus malignis' (*Vita I* 36.14 [§65]). What exactly these stigmata are is not clear. In §67 they are described as being worn on the heads of the criminals, but Picard in his introduction to his translation points out that the exact form of these stigmata is unknown and can only be the subject of conjecture (1989: 10). Whatever form these stigmata take, Conall and his associates ask Brigit to bless them, but

¹⁶⁰ Your seed will serve the seed of your brothers and there will not be any kings of your seed ever...

instead she prays that they should not hurt anyone or themselves. This wish was then granted by God, who made Conall and his followers believe that they had destroyed a fort in the territory of the Cruthin. When Conall learned that he had not performed what he believed he had done, he laid aside the amulets. As a result, Brigit offered to protect Conall when he was in danger. This turned out to be fortunate for Conall; when scouts from an opposing army were seeking him, Conall found that he was too exhausted to continue fleeing. Instead, he chose to rest and call upon Brigit to protect him. When the scouts arrived, all they see are a group of monks praying around a fire.

Of course, all of the people that Brigit curses gave rise to dynasties that sat on the border of Leinster, namely the Cenél Cairpre and the Cenél Ardgall. Cairpre was noted in the annals for his aggression against the Laigin at the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries (Byrne 1974: 91), however, by the seventh century, his descendants had been eclipsed by the descendants of Diarmait mac Cerbaill. What we cannot ignore is the fact that Brigit was protecting and being praised by one of Patrick's chief allies and the descendant of two of the most powerful Uí Néill groups. Indeed, these two families were the most powerful groups among the Southern Uí Néill. In such an alliance, Brigit is able to affirm her role as a Leinster saint, but still able to secure an alliance with Patrick. In addition, by acting to a lesser extent as the protector of Cairpre, she assumes the more feminine role of a peacemaker while assuring that people within these groups maintain loyalty to Brigit and to Patrick.

One aspect of Brigit's interactions with royalty that should not be ignored are the men with amulets who are pledged to kill people. These wicked men seem to be engaged in a practice called *diberg*, defined in the *DIL* as 'marauding, freebooting,

pillaging'. Sharpe makes a case that these young men have a place in society that is never clear (1979: 90). He then went on to argue that these outlaws may have been members of pre-Christian dynastic groups that have since been displaced, however, he offers no convincing evidence for this view (1979: 92). However, he does point out that these brigands were, like the *fenians* described as pagan and were consistently attacked by the church. However, Sharpe argues that *díberg* and membership in a *fenian* band were separate entities. Indeed, he rightly points out that we have no example of *fenians* wearing any sort of amulet or stigmata (1979: 86). He also points to O' Mulconry's Glossary, which makes a distinction between the two groups:

Díbergg .i. dí·bi·arg .i. ní la laochacht adrímtar ut arg fíán, ar ní
bí i coir laochachtae diultad De 7 gíallnae Demuin.
(cited in Sharpe 1979: 86)¹⁶¹

From this passage Sharpe concludes that the *fenians* were not engaged, or at least perceived to be engaged in *díberg*.

However, McCone takes a differing and more convincing view than Sharpe's. While he too accepts that *díberg* was a practice with pagan roots and connotations, according to McCone, these men are young members of the nobility, who are possibly embarking on a rite of initiation (McCone 1986: 13). We have seen in §62 that when Brigit was approached by a queen asking for blessings so that she might conceive a child, Brigit granted the request, but warned that the child would cause great blood shed and would be accursed. McCone takes this as being an indication that the child will join a *fenian* band (1986: 9). He points to *Togail Bruidne Da*

¹⁶¹ Díbergg .i. non-be-hero .i. they do not obey the reckoning of the noble fíán, for they are not right, reckoning to reject God and serve the devil.

Derga §§19-20, when Conaire prevents the sons of Dond Desa from joining a *fenian* band. As a result they complained of not being allowed to partake of ‘gat 7 brat 7 guin daíne 7 díberg.’ (*Togail Bruidne Da Derga* 193-194).¹⁶² From this McCone concludes that *díberga* is a part of the activities of the *fianna*.

Brigit twice encounters young men with ‘stigmata diabolica’ (*Vita I*, §§ 65, 67). In both of these cases, the young men are seeking Brigit’s blessings for the acts which they are about to undertake, an act which Sharpe takes as being a contrivance of the writer to bring the men into contact with the saint. In each case, Brigit asks them to put down their amulets, which they refuse to do. Instead they proceed to kill their targets. In each case they believe that they have accomplished what they have set out to do, only to discover that they have been fooled into thinking that they have killed the person in question. Sharpe makes one crucial point that he fails to fully take into account. In his article ‘Hiberno-Latin *Laicus*, Irish *Láech* and the Devil’s Men’ Sharpe lists a number of saints who encounter brigands (1979: 83-84), including Ciarán of Clonmacnoise (*VSH I* 214-15), Ailbe (*Salmanticensis* 126 §36), and Cainnech (*Salmanticensis* 194 §45). In all of these cases, as with Brigit, the brigands repent for their actions, but do not receive baptism. Sharpe argues that this is a result of the authors attempting to emphasise the act of penance above conversion, as well as an attempt to ensure that the emphasis is on the saint rather than the outlaw (1979: 84-85). However, we have seen that in §62 of the *Vita I* Brigit is concerned that the unborn child of a queen will become a brigand, and that the queen’s coming to Brigit indicates that the child will receive a Christian upbringing. Furthermore, the *díbergaig* themselves come to Brigit for blessing,

¹⁶² stealing and plunder and the wounding of art (vandalism?) and *díberg*.

indicating that they have at least acknowledged the power of the Christian saint. While Sharpe points out that the emphasis is not so much on not committing the act, which Brigit fails to prevent, as on the penance, which these saints are consistently able to get the brigands to do (1979: 85). However, it should be noted that penance is a Christian activity, and would serve little purpose if a person had not yet converted and been baptised.

What this means for Conall is that Brigit is dealing with him as a flawed, but Christian king. While the Brigidine authors certainly would have boasted if they had had any grounds to believe that Brigit had converted such an important figure, instead they showed her acting as protector and confessor. Conall repents, lays aside his amulets, praises God and Brigit, and reaps the reward. While Patrick toys with national politics cursing some lineages and blessing others, Brigit plays the peacemaker and guides the kings towards proper Christian living. Together these two saints play a powerful role in dynastic politics, one saint using a strong stick to keep the kings in line, the other offering peace, penance and guidance for rulers.

Conclusion

In the hagiography of early Ireland Patrick and Brigit enjoyed a friendship and partnership that seems to have reflected a friendly relationship between their respective cults. Due to the Uí Néill take over of large areas of the territory of the Laigin, as well as constant politicking between the two respective kingdoms, Armagh and Kildare were forced into a situation that required them to work together. This closeness was fostered by the rise of upstart federations, notably

the *familia* of Columba. Thomas Charles-Edwards has recently pointed out that the Columban federation was supported by the powerful English churches after they had converted to the Roman system of dating Easter (2000: 429-438). This new and powerful faction in Ireland would have provided a firm and practical reason for Armagh and Kildare to work closely together, a political reality that seems to be depicted in the hagiographical depiction of Brigit and Patrick.

It is not only in the hagiography that this friendliness is depicted. The seventh century *Liber Angeli* as well as *Ultán's Hymn*, and its notes, both depict Brigit and Patrick as joint pillars of Ireland. As a result of the friendliness of Armagh and Kildare, Patrick and Brigit are often depicted in friendly and flattering terms in each other's hagiography. This is especially true for depictions of Patrick in Brigidine texts, where he is often the more dominant figure of the two. The one exception to this is Cogitosus, who declares all of Ireland as the domain of Brigit. However, his claims should be seen in light of his moderating tone immediately after making his claim, as well as the fact that he was primarily interested in promoting Kildare, making his claims susceptible to accusations of exaggeration. Tírechán, who in his work does not mention Brigit, does not seem bothered by Cogitosus's claims. Muirchú also refers to Cogitosus as a father. Whatever the exact connotation of calling Cogitosus a father may be, it does indicate a degree of respect for his work. In short there does not seem to be any formal agreement between Armagh and Kildare. Furthermore, it should be noted that there is no record of an agreement in the annals or any other historical text. Even a forgery would indicate some sort of awareness of a formal relationship.

Indeed, often Brigit acquiesces to Patrick's wishes without any indication that he may be less holy or less important than Brigit. This capitulation is probably a result of the political situation of Armagh and Kildare; Patrick is sometimes even shown as the greater of the two saints in the Brigidine biography. Of course, Patrick is not the only representative of Armagh in the texts. Other bishops who were associated with Patrick also come into contact with Brigit. While these contacts take a number of different shapes and forms, Brigit is always the superior in the relationship. For instance, Brigit is obedient, yet spiritually superior to bishop Mel, and counsels, in an almost humorous way, bishop Brón. While Brigit's relationship with Patrick is either as an equal, or with an edge to Patrick, Brigit is the superior of Patrick's associates, indicating a powerful position for Brigit and her *paruchia* in the politics of the church in Ireland.

Finally we see that in her encounters with kings, Brigit, like Patrick, was promoting her interests. She avoided comparison with any sovereignty goddess, while at the same time supporting the ancestor of the powerful *Síl nÁedo Sláine* and *Clann Cholmáin* of the *Uí Néill*. Such support would have been crucial for Kildare's relationship with Armagh. Additionally, with both of these groups vying for the support of families in Leinster, Kildare was in prominent position to push for its position nationally. The most likely explanation was that the Patrician cult and the Brigidine cult were always on friendly terms with each other. The political circumstances would have warranted co-operation from an early date, and although there is no formal record of political unity, the texts certainly reflected a co-operative spirit between the two cults.

Chapter 4

Feasts and abundance

Introduction

One of the most unusual aspects of Saint Brigit is the large number of food production miracles that are associated with her. Her consistent ability to produce large amounts of food and drink has caused modern scholars to consider this to be part of the evidence for there being a continuity with Brigit's pre-Christian namesake (Ó Briain 1947: 37-38). However, it would seem more likely that many of the feast tales form part of a broader Christian culture of charitable giving as a virtue, combined with an economy of gift giving and feasting as a means of gaining political advantage.

In her recent article 'The Need to Give: Suffering and Female Sanctity in the Middle Ages', JoAnne McNamara identified the role that charitable works play in the lives of female saints. In particular, in the early Middle Ages, charitable acts were used to give their male counterparts a more compassionate and humane image. Often these male counterparts were noble and secular, and they were not typically known for their compassionate leadership styles (1997:200-201). For example, Venantius Fortunatus, in his *Life of the Holy Radegund* describes Queen Radegund, who gave the gifts that Clothar had given her to the poor.¹⁶³ These gifts often originated as loot, but by giving the goods to the poor and to the church, Radegund, who was taken as loot herself, created an environment that almost justified the warlike ways of

Clothar, or at least made many people the beneficiaries of his violent way of life. Almost certainly, some of the charitable acts of Brigit play a similar role in the Brigidine *vitae*, especially when she gives away her father's goods before she becomes a nun (*Vita I* §18, *Bethu Brigitte* §13). However, upon taking the veil, Brigit no longer had a secular male counterpart whose behaviour needed to be justified. Indeed, once she had taken the veil, the charitable acts of Brigit included numerous miracles of feasts and abundance. While other saints were known for asceticism and suffering of the flesh, Brigit, to put it bluntly ate lots and drank lots; at least relative to other saints.

There are too many episodes where Brigit is either described as eating, or it is implied that she is eating, such as by stating that she hosted a feast, to describe each one. However, the benefits of hosting Brigit is made clear in §26 of the *Vita II* and §110 of the *Vita II*, when an unnamed woman hosted Brigit who was travelling to Mag Breg. After burning her loom and killing her only calf so that she might feed the saint, the woman who hosted Brigit found that her loom was restored and that the calf she had slaughtered was safely back with its mother. In the *Bethu Brigitte*, after Brigit has cured another Brigit of a demon of sloth who was with her, and banished it permanently, the author of the text then declared 'Cibum summunt; gratias agunt Deo.' (*Bethu Brigitte* §31)¹⁶⁴ Brigit was certainly not a model for asceticism.

This seems to have been a method of manipulating the economy to support Kildare's claim to *paruchia*. Under the potlatch system, an economic system described most fully in Marcel Mauss' book *The Gift* (1967), whereby gift giving and

¹⁶³ There are numerous miracles where Radegund distributes riches to the poor or to the church. In particular see (*Radegund* §2-3).

¹⁶⁴ They take up their food; they give thanks to God.

the hosting of feasts cemented social relations and economic status in traditional societies, generosity and wealth were indicators of a person's social status. O'Leary applied the works of Mauss and other thinkers to understand the role of feasting and gift giving in early Irish saga literature, especially Ulster cycle (1984). Ultimately O'Leary argued that the Ulster heroes were as aggressive with the feast in attempting to assert their social status as they were in using the sword (1984: 126-27). In the Christian context, charity and giving were considered to be among the highest of virtues, however, just because was a virtue, it did mean that it could not be deployed by hagiographers to support the claims of their *paruchia*. Brigit was able to use her abilities to provide abundance in order to both provide an image of Christian charity as well as claim sections of Ireland for Kildare. Using gifts and feasting Brigit's biographers were able to promote the new faith, and with it the Brigidine cult, without resorting to the sometimes violent and brutal conflicts of male saints such as Patrick and Columba.

In addition to using the feast to gain support from the noble classes, Brigit acted as a more general protector and provider of wealth through her active protection of food and livestock. This is especially true for her association with dairy products, which were, as we shall see, both a staple of the Irish diet as well as a symbol of purity. In addition, Brigit acted as a protector of livestock, especially cattle, which were important both to the diet as well as to the wealth of people in early Ireland. Brigit's perceived ability to produce food and feasts as well as protect economically important livestock placed Brigit in a position to achieve widespread popularity and for her *paruchia* to be politically aggressive. As we shall see the Brigidine authors uniquely combined the charitable nature of female saints, with the

expectations of the local economy in Ireland, with the aim of advancing the cause of their patron.

Feasting in Early Ireland

While Brigit is a very different figure from the martial figures of the saga literature, she, like them, uses feasting to advance their causes. The image of the Irish martial hero is one of a figure who is quick to lose his temper and exercises that temper with a sword. As mentioned above, Philip O'Leary, drawing on the work of Mauss, has pointed out that the heroes of Irish literature use other modes of combat as well. This whole system centres on the feast; at the feast, the heroes come together and establish their position within the society in question (O'Leary 1984: 115-17). More importantly, at least from the point of view of the host, the feast reflects the honour of the person hosting the feast. Mauss points out that hosting a feast is a brave, if often necessary, act to begin with. The giver of the feast is, in essence, laying down a challenge and showing his worth. It is up to the invited parties to respond to that challenge (Mauss 1967: 10-11). The feast was filled with implications for those who were attending, or perhaps should have been. A failure to invite someone could be seen as a hostile action, and a failure to respond to the invitation was often seen as a sign that one did not have the wealth to respond, which would often lead to a lessening of that individual's social status (Mauss 1967: 39). It should be noted that Mauss points out that this obligation does not always apply (1967: 39). In the case of the Ulster Cycle, O'Leary points out that in *Mesca Ulad*, Cú Chulainn, who is often a law unto himself, refuses to attend Fintan's feast while insisting that Fintan attends his (1984: 126, MU 111-188).

The motif of feasting to support social status occurs in medieval Irish literature.¹⁶⁵ Although this is not the place to immerse ourselves in a comprehensive discussion, we can cite a few examples of feasting in the texts. O'Leary points out that in the *Mesca Ulad*, we find that the treatment the warriors receive at the feast is contingent on their own social refinement (O'Leary 1984: 115):

Ár sain ra hairecrad a óltech la Conchobar, ar gnímaib 7 cenélaib, ar grádaib 7 dánaib 7 ar chainbésaib im chóemchostud na fledi.
(MU 209-211)¹⁶⁶

Indeed, in modern politics this feast could best be described as a 'power play' by Conchobar. At the beginning of the text, we find that Ulster has been divided into three parts, ruled by Conchobar, Cú Chulainn and a figure called Fintan. For a year the province is divided like this, until Conchobar arranges a feast for Fintan and Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn comes in spite of warnings from his wife and charioteer, and in spite of the fact that he had a feast planned already. Conchobar then gets Fintan and Cú Chulainn to agree to let him be king for a year, and if the kingdom is better off at the end of that year, to let him be king permanently. Once the deal is made, Cú Chulainn feels free to enjoy the feast for the better part of three days (MU 125-129). Equally important to the hosting of the feast is the accepting of the hospitality, lest one appears as unable to rise to the challenge. An example of such is in the *Cath Maige Tuired*. The Dagda is forced by the Fomorians to eat a large serving of porridge from a hole in the ground when he goes to negotiate a peace treaty with them. He does this, and even though his stomach is grossly distended at the end of the meal, he still scrapes the bottom of the hole with his finger, implying that the

¹⁶⁵ For a full discussion see O'Leary (1984).

Fomorians have been niggardly in their hospitality (Gray 1982-83: 234; *CMT* §§ 89-92).

One of the distinguishing features of Saint Brigit is that, unlike so many other Irish saints, she is not much of an ascetic. She rarely fasts, and then only for brief periods such as in §38 of the *Vita I*; she discovers that the servants of a priest have a lame brother and blind sister in a cart:

Nocte itaque ueniente, comederunt et biberunt. Sola uero Brigita ieiunauit et uigilauit. Mane autem illa effudit rorem matutinum super pedes paralitici, et statim ille sanus surrexit et ceca femina inluminata est. (*Vita I* 18.3-6)¹⁶⁷

This constant motif of abundance has been one of the main features for authors to believe that Saint Brigit is a counterpart to the pagan goddess of the same name (Green 1995: 200; Condren 1989: 65; et al). However, the authors of the Brigidine lives would have been aware of the numerous tales, such as the *Baile an Scáil* or *The Adventure of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedón*, that involved a female figure granting sovereignty. The image of a woman being the agent responsible for sovereignty is of course, in conflict with the Christian doctrine where it is God who grants kingship. This is especially true when it is a sexually promiscuous figure such as Medb. As agents of God's will, the new sovereignty figure has become the saint, who often bestowed the kingship upon a person, and often his lineage, who has been faithful and good to that saint (Ó Coileáin 1983: 36-45). This image is all well and good when it is a male saint who is seen to be bestowing the will of God onto the

¹⁶⁶ After that, seats were arranged in the drinking hall by Conchobar, on the basis of their respective deeds and kindreds social grades and talent and gifts and refinements in regard to elegant consumption of the feast.

¹⁶⁷ So night came, and they ate and drank. Only Brigit alone fasted and stayed awake. Moreover, in the morning, she poured the morning dew over the cripple's feet. Instantly, he stood up, healed, and the blind woman could see.

rightful king. However, this image is slightly more uncomfortable when it is a woman who is attempting to do the same, because of the similarity to the pagan image of the goddess granting, or actually being, sovereignty.¹⁶⁸ This discomfort can be seen in the fact that Brigit hardly ever rewards a person with kingship, predicts kingship for a person, or is responsible for the removal of a person from the throne, all of which are common motifs in Irish hagiography. As we have seen above, the only time Brigit makes an exception to this is in §88 of the *Vita I*, when a king of the Laigin gives Brigit's father a sword and frees a slave for Brigit. As a reward, Brigit offers him eternal life and that his sons will be kings forever. However, this offer is spurned, with the king rejecting this opportunity in favour of a long life and constant victory in battle against the Uí Néill.

This led on to a potentially awkward situation for the Brigidine hagiographers. They needed to promote the interests of their cult within the sphere of secular and religious politics, without Brigit being too strong a reminder of the pagan past of Ireland. Of course, the claims had to be made in a language that could be widely understood. This language was the language of the feast. By providing abundance she revealed to others that she was, in effect, in a superior position to those around her. One example of this is to be found in §47 of the *Vita I*. Brigit gave a banquet 'in honorem solemnitatis Domini, sed hanc caenam diuisit pauperibus' (*Vita I* 23.28-24.1).¹⁶⁹ This generous act upset her community, either on the grounds that there might not be enough food for all of them as well as for the poor, or simply that feeding this many poor would have been expensive. At that moment, a countryman

¹⁶⁸ There are numerous discussions on the image of sovereignty being described as a woman giving an intoxicating drink to a man. The most thorough discussion is to be found in Enright's book, *The Lady With a Mead Cup* (1996).

was bringing a banquet to his king, but managed to get lost and ended up at Brigit's church instead. The man realised that God had made him lose his way and he donated the banquet to Brigit, saying that he would make another banquet for this king. The king, upon hearing of this event, gave the countryman and all of his people as well as a second wagon-load of food to Brigit. The king obviously had to give something to Brigit so as not to be outdone by his countryman. Furthermore, the king was, in essence, responding to a gift that he had received. The feast was in honour of 'solemnitatis Domini' or the solemnity of the lord, so it was only fitting that the king, through the medium of Brigit, returned what he could in exchange for the peace experienced during his reign as king, which would have been granted to him by God. In other words, he returns the debt that he owes God by rewarding Brigit.

This process can also be seen with other churches. On one Easter Brigit wanted to give a banquet for all the churches in Mide (*Vita I* §23, *Bethu Brigitte* §21). However, she only had enough for a vat of beer due to a shortage of provisions. She divided the beer up into two vessels and distributed them to the surrounding churches. Fortunately, there was enough beer for the churches to be supplied during all of the festivities that lead up to Easter. Indeed, the *Bethu Brigitte* is more specific, claiming that eighteen vatfuls were created from the one sack of barley. The vat was brought to the various churches, and each time it returned, there was enough beer to fill it and send it to another church.

In another incident, Brigit was a guest in the church of Lassar, when Patrick came with a large crowd (*Vita I* §42). The local community worried about how they

¹⁶⁹ ... in honour of the solemnity of the lord, but she shared this feast with the poor; cf. Luke 14, 16.

were going to meet their obligation of feeding the group. The community had only twelve loaves, some milk, and a cooked sheep. Brigit told them that the sacred scriptures would make everyone forget about bodily food, so that when Patrick's group came, they all felt filled by the meal; this is in spite of the fact that somehow more food was left at the end of the meal than there was to start with. Obviously, Lassar, as a poor nun, would not be able to repay Brigit for the favour that she gave to her. As a result, 'et postea obtulit se Laisrea sancta et suum locum sanctae Brigitte in aeternum' (*Vita I* 21.17-18).¹⁷⁰ In §82 of the *Vita I*, some unnamed clerics came and preached to Brigit. She then ordered her cook to prepare a meal of bread, butter, and onions for her guests. However, the cook did not have these things to prepare, so Brigit ordered him to sweep the floor, shut the kitchen, and then went home and pray while she goes to church. When the time for the feast came, the cook found enough food there to feed the guests plus the entire community for seven days.

Of course, such behaviour may well have come under criticism given the need for a holy person, more especially a female holy person, to abandon the desires of the flesh. In §31 of the *Bethu Brigitte* and §31 of the *Vita I* Saint Brigit went to the home of a noble virgin who was also named Brigit. After healing a sick member of the household Saint Brigit began to stare at the dish of the other Brigit. When the young girl asked the saint what the saint was staring at Brigit told her that there was a demon on the dish. After making the sign of the cross over her eyes, the saint was able to describe the gruesome image of the demon, the saint spoke with the demon, asking him the reason that he resided there. The demon responded: 'Apud uirginem

¹⁷⁰ and after that, Saint Lassar gave herself and her place to Saint Brigit forever. [§42]

hic habito et cause pigritudinis eius locum in ea habeo.’(*Vita I* 14.18-19)¹⁷¹ Brigit then allowed the girl to see the demon declaring: ‘Uide quem nutrire solebas multis annis.’ (*Vita I* 14.23-24)¹⁷² One of the more interesting points about this miracle was the fact that the girl was given the same name as our saint. While the reason for this is left unexplained by the authors, it would seem likely that by producing such miraculous bounties, within a context that valued asceticism, could have opened St. Brigit to widespread criticism from opposing *paruchia*. One possible way of handling these criticisms would have been to argue that the wrong Brigit was being considered, by showing Saint Brigit interacting with the more gluttonous Brigit would have drawn a distinction between the sinner and the saint.

In addition to being able to provide an abundance of food, there are two occasions when she refuses, or is unable, to eat food given to her in hospitality. These two incidents occur when a pagan offers food to her. In the first instance she is a child:

In tan ba mithig a gait de c[h]ígh ba deithidnech di in drui.
Na(ch) ní do-bereth-side di-sí na-sceth-sí fa chet-hoir, 7 nibu messa de a
blath.

‘Ra-[f]etúr-sa tra’, ar in drui, ‘a(n) daas ind ingen, quia ego
sum inmundus’.

Ro-erbad iarum bó find audercc dia taiscid 7 ba slan di.
(*Bethu Brigitte* §5)¹⁷³

In both this version and in the *Vita I* §11, Brigit is a child, and is caused to be ill by the food; it seems likely that there would be no cause for alarm or discourtesies. However, the incident almost repeats itself when a pagan offers her food when she is

¹⁷¹ I live here with this virgin and it is because of her laziness that I have a dwelling-place here. [§31]

¹⁷² See the one you have made a habit of nursing for many years. [§31]

¹⁷³ When it was time to take her from the teat, the druid was worried. Anything he gave to her, she vomited it immediately, and yet her colour was not the worse from it. ‘I know it,’ said the druid, ‘what

an abbess (*Vita I* §40; *Bethu Brigitte* §41). This case is different, although it is said that in both cases that she cannot eat because the food is impure, this time she says the food is impure before she has eaten any and has not been made ill. She lays down a challenge to the man, refusing to eat his food unless he first converts to Christianity. He accepts this challenge which leads to his conversion and Brigit accepting his hospitality. It is worth noting that the text states that his hospitality was also offered to Patrick, who also refused it unless the pagan converted. The pagan man did not accept Patrick's conditions for receiving hospitality. However, he was willing to convert for Brigit, indicating that the worth of Brigit's hospitality was greater than that of Patrick's:

‘At-rubart-sa em’, olse, ‘nacham-baitsifeth Patraic cona muntir.
Creitfi im-duit-siu’, fri Brigit.
(*Bethu Brigitte* §41)¹⁷⁴

Of course, we have established that after she successfully converted the pagan, Patrick immediately asserted his superiority over Brigit by appointing her a priest to act as her charioteer.

Brigit would also accept inheritance as condition. In §120 of the *Vita I*, a druid offered Brigit his inheritance if she would meet him at his death-bed. As he lay dying, he told his household to prepare for Brigit's coming. When she arrived, he was baptised and died a believer in Christ. This is another example of a good druid in the Brigidine dossier, and his willingness to leave his inheritance to the saint illustrates that. Indeed, Brigit rewards his good nature with a baptism. Indeed, it seems to illustrate an exchange of worldly goods for a spiritual one. However, what

ails the girl. It is because I am impure.’ Then a white red eared cow was entrusted to sustain her, and she was made whole from it.

is unclear is the reason why he had chosen only to convert once his life was close to ending. The reason for waiting so long to be converted is left unexplained in the texts, and will unfortunately remain unexplained in this thesis.

One item of food given special prominence in the Irish law texts was salted meat, especially bacon. Kelly points out that this is probably due to the high cost of salting a bullock; as a result, salted beef is rarely mentioned (Kelly 1997: 336). A flitch of bacon was part of the food rent that a lord received from his clients (*CIH* ii 778.37) and a flitch on a hook was a sign of a farmer's prosperity (*CIH* ii 563.28, iii 780.7). Brigit was noticeably free in her distributions of bacon. In *Vita I* §14, *Vita II* §13, and *Bethu Brigte* §10 she gives bacon to a dog, but the amount of bacon is not reduced when it comes time for the bacon to be eaten by the people. Similarly, in *Vita I* §105, a dog ignores bacon which Brigit has set aside. Brigit's ability to protect food, especially food that is itself a sign of wealth is presumably meant to position our saint as a protector of abundance and place her in a superior position in the realm of the feast.

Once a person has converted, the ethical expectations placed on that person are raised considerably. While pagans were not expected to adhere to any standard of Christian morality, this is not to say that there was no penance for druidry. For example, we find in the *Canones Hibernenses*:

Haec est poenitentia magi uel uotiui mali si<ue> crudelis, +iddem ergach,+ uel praeconis uel cohabitatoris uel heretici uel adulteri, id est .vii. anni in pane et aqua.
(*Canones Hibernensis* I §4)¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ 'Truly, I have said that,' he said, 'Patrick and his retinue would not baptise me. I will believe for you.' He said to Brigit.

¹⁷⁵ Here is the penance of a druid or one who has been vowed to evil or cruelty +corrupt text+ or of an (auctioneer ?), or of a cohabiter, or of a heretic, or of an adulterer, it is seven years on bread and water.

We also find in the *Old Irish Table of Commutations* (in *The Irish Penitentials*) that druidry is one of the sins that cannot be commuted except by death, divine message, illness, or extra mortification (§5). Presumably this would have applied to Christians who had gone back to their pagan roots after baptism. Indeed, in the *Synodus II S. Patricii* we find all sins were cleansed at baptism:

XXXI De Gentilibus qui ante Baptismum Credunt Quam Penitentiam Habent:

Remittentur quidem omnium peccata in baptismo; sed qui cum fidei conscientia infidelis tempore uixit paene ut fidelis peccator iudicandus.

(*Second Synod of Patrick* 196 XXXI)¹⁷⁶

In other words, those who have learned of the Christian faith and have lapsed back into paganism are not to be treated in the same manner as those who have converted for the first time.

While in the texts the pagans seem to understand the nature of the gift giving, and offer their goods in return for Brigit's spiritual blessings, the same cannot always be said for those who are members of the faith. On a number of occasions Christians are represented as not fully comprehending the nature of the potlatch system and its role within Christianity. While pagans barter for their souls in the Brigidine lives, Christians are expected to give and receive with humble piety. When they fail to do this, they stand the possibility of facing Brigit's wrath. In §32 of both the *Vita I* and *Bethu Brigte* a woman, described as a '*caillech*' in the Old Irish text offers a gift of apples to Brigit, who, much to the agitation of the woman, distributes the apples to

I would like to thank Professor Gillies who has pointed out that the corrupt text may have contained '*díbergach*', translated as a 'brigand' in other parts of this thesis.

¹⁷⁶ Concerning Pagans who believe before being baptised, what penance should they have: The sins of all people are of course remitted in baptism. But he who with a faithful conscience has lived for a time as an unbeliever is to be judged almost as a believing sinner.

lepers. She then declares: ‘Tibi et tuis uirginibus haec poma attuli, non leprosis.’ (*Vita I* 15.3-4)¹⁷⁷ Brigit responds with an uncharacteristic, albeit not excessively harsh curse: ‘Male agis, prohibens elemosinam dare. Ideo ligna tua fructum non habebunt in aeternum.’ (*Vita I* 15.5-6)¹⁷⁸ Both accounts then clearly state that the orchard remained barren, with the *Bethu Brigitte* specifying that foliage alone appeared on the trees.

The *Vita I* also includes three episodes involving ungrateful lepers. §76 involves two lepers who ask for healing from Brigit. The first one was healed, but when ordered to cleanse the other he refused, preferring instead to brag about his own healthy condition. Brigit then cleansed the second leper herself, and while she did this, the first leper declared: ‘Modo sentio scintillas ignis esse super humeros meos.’ (*Vita I* 47.10-11),¹⁷⁹ and while the second leper was healed, the first leper’s illness was restored. §§78-79 tells the story of two lepers who ask for a cow from Brigit. After she had given them her only cow, one leper refused to share it with the other, who was grateful to the saint nevertheless. Brigit told the more humble leper to wait to see what God would provide. In the meantime, the arrogant leper could not move the cow, for which he blamed Brigit. As a result, Brigit then predicted that the cow would do him no good. §79 continues with a man offering Brigit a cow, which she offers to the other leper. As the two sick men left, the arrogant leper was sucked away by an unspecified river never to be seen again, while the other man escaped with both his life and his cow.

¹⁷⁷ For you and your virgins have I brought these apples, not for lepers. [§32]

¹⁷⁸ You have behaved poorly, not allowing us to give alms. Therefore your trees will not bear fruit forever. [§32]

¹⁷⁹ I now feel there are sparks of fire over my shoulders [§76]

Of course, there was some allowance for disrespectful children, but they did not seem to suffer as much as their adult counterparts. §7 of the *Vita II* and §101 of the *Vita I* both tell of a young boy who repeatedly asked for sheep. Each time Brigit granted him one. However, the next morning Brigit was not missing any sheep, and the boy had not gained any. Of course, the fact that this was the prank of children meant that Brigit's punishment of the boy was nothing worse than simply not letting him keep the sheep that he thought he had acquired.

Saint Brigit is an exceptional saint. She does not come to be martyred by any of the three forms of martyrdom found in Ireland, these being red, white and blue martyrs, respectively being death, hardship through fasting and penitence, and expulsion from their home (Stancliffe 1982: 44).¹⁸⁰ In order for her cult to become a powerful and thriving one, Brigit needed to be presented in a way that maximised her control over the land and people. To have her granting sovereignty, as the means by which she invested those in the political sphere, would have smacked too much of the sovereignty goddesses of the pagan past. She therefore had to find a different means of exerting control and legitimising the claims of her *paruchia*. To this end, her cult emphasised her giving and bounty. By eliminating references to kingship, she was distanced from the image of the pagan goddess while still being seen as a giving and generous figure. By means of the imagery of feasting, she put those around her into debt, and secured the future and claims of her cult while keeping her integrity as a Christian saint.

Beer

In spite of the avoidance in the Brigidine texts of the theme of the goddess giving sovereignty to the king, the motif was still a familiar one to the people of early medieval Ireland. One of the more common ways of representing this transfer of power was through an old hag engaging in, and being restored to youth by, sexual intercourse with a king. Possibly the most famous example of this motif is to be found in the tale of *The Adventure of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedón*, when only Níall of all his brothers would sleep with an old hag. Once Níall had done this the hag became beautiful thus becoming one of the main reasons why sovereignty was conferred onto Níall (§§ 14-15). However, to place a saint in a similar role to the old hag would have been unthinkable to our hagiographers. A second realisation of the goddess conferring sovereignty was through her giving the king a cup of mead or beer. Indeed, this image existed well into the Christian era, with the tale *Baile in Scáil* (1861).¹⁸¹ In this tale, Lug instructs his female consort to give a drink to a succession of rulers destined to become kings of Ulster down to the eleventh century. It is also worth noting that it seems likely that Medb's name is cognate with the English word 'mead' (Green 1992b: 147).

Brigit also brews beer, and thus creates a possible problem for our authors. Cogitosus uses the image of Brigit as a brewer, but is careful to quickly draw a biblical parallel:

Mirabili quoque eventu ab hac venerabili Brigida leprosi cervisiam petentes, cum non haberet illa, videns aquam ad balnea paratam, cum virtute fidei benedicens, in optimam convertit cervisiam, et

¹⁸⁰ For more on this see Stancliffe (1982).

¹⁸¹ This text, which dates from the eleventh century, seems to have an earlier ninth century stratum. However, since the king list in the tale is accurate to the eleventh century we can assume that the image was still being used for practical purposes (Herbert 1992: 273 n. 4).

abundanter sitientibus exhausit. Ille enim, qui in Cana Galilaeae aquam convertit in vinum, per hujus quoque beatissimae feminae fidem aquam mutavit in cervisiam.
(*Vita II* 780)¹⁸²

In the *Vita I* and *Bethu Brigitte*, the authors are less concerned with drawing biblical parallels when Brigit brews beer. In the first case, Brigit created beer for her ailing mother after being refused some from a neighbour (*Vita I* §13, *Bethu Brigitte* §8).¹⁸³ As a result, his beer supply ran dry. The next incident occurred as Easter is approaching (*Vita I* §23, *Bethu Brigitte* §21). Brigit wished to have enough ale to give to her churches in Mide at Easter time. However, she only had enough for one vat. In spite of this shortage, she managed to produce enough beer for eighteen churches. In addition to showing her ability to provide hospitality, it should be remembered that Holy Week has always been the most important period in the Christian calendar. It is, in effect, when Christ becomes the king of kings. By specifying that the beer comes on this date it seems possible that Brigit giving the ale to Christ acts, in effect, to help secure his sovereignty in Ireland. This is reinforced a week later when Brigit is faced with a shortage of ale after Easter:

Alia autem die postquam consummata est septimana Pasche, dixit sancta Brigit puellis suis: 'Si deficit ceruisa quam parauimus solemnitati Pasche?'
(*Vita I*: 12.6-8)¹⁸⁴

After that, some nuns came in with some water, which was blessed by Brigit and turned into ale '...ad instar uini optimi...' (*Vita I*: 12.15-16).¹⁸⁵ This again shows

¹⁸² After that, another miraculous event on the part of venerable Brigit. Some lepers desired ale. Because she had none, seeing water prepared for the baths, she blessed it with the strength of her faith, and changed it into excellent ale, and she drew it in abundance for the thirsty lepers. For he, who in Cana in Galilee changed water into wine, also through the faith of this blessed woman changed water into beer. [§8]

¹⁸³ Beer was often used as a cure for illness. For more on this, and in particular this miracle see Kelly (1997: 349-50).

Brigit giving wine, this time to Christ's guests – the priests. This is an effective symbol of the sovereignty being given to the church. While Christ was the ultimate sovereign, the church was his agent on Earth. It is important to remember that Brigit is not deciding that the church will be granted sovereignty, but rather she is a supportive agent of it. In much the same way as in the *Baile an Scáil*, where the Ulstermen changed the sovereignty goddess into an agent of Lug, so too Brigit is an agent of God's will on Earth.

Milk

Another area over which Brigit is made to exert patronage is production and supply of milk and other dairy products. Dairy products were a vital part of the medieval Irish diet (Kelly 1997: 323-30, Lucas 1989:41-67), and, as Kelly and Lucas both show, the majority of the work with dairy products was probably done by women (Kelly 1997: 450-51, Lucas 1989: 42-43). Kelly suggests that the milkers may have been of either sex. One of the few examples of male milkers is Brigit's milker. Although Brigit was a part of a women's community, her milker was described in the *Book of Leinster* genealogies as a man named Colmán (Kelly 1997: 450-51, *LL* vi.1663.50985). Bray argues that this is the result of an obvious connection between women and lactation; an ability to produce milk with their own bodies, would possibly be seen to give women control over milk for processes such as butter and cheese making, as well as milk going sour (Bray 1989: 33).

¹⁸⁴ On another day after the completion of Easter Week, Saint Brigit asked her followers if 'the ale has run out, which we had prepared for the Easter solemnity?' [§28]

¹⁸⁵ in the manner of the best wine [§28]

Additionally, there was the belief that a cow would not give milk without its calf present, strengthening this supposed bond between milk and maternity (Lucas 1958: 80, 1989: 45). This is witnessed in *Bethu Brigitte* §22, when a woman loses a calf that she had intended to give to Brigit, she complained that the cow was of no use without its calf. Indeed, Lucas cites a number of saints, including Monenna, Berach, Kevin, Finan, and Máedóc who miraculously cause cows to give milk without their calves being present (1989: 45-55). The seemingly obvious connection between maternity and milk meant that it would make sense for a maternal figure to protect dairy products, and no saint has as many miracles associated with dairy products as Brigit. The emphasis on milk in mythology is strongly represented in the myths of northern Europe in general, and Ireland in particular (Davidson 1996: 91-104).

In many areas of the world, milk is not a part of the diet, as the people do not have the proper enzymes to digest lactose (Davidson 1996: 91). In Mediterranean Europe, oils and wine filled many of the roles that milk has in the northern areas, most notably in cooking, where milk has replaced oil (Davidson 1996: 92). Additionally, the lack of sunlight in Ireland, means that the human bodies are not able to produce enough vitamin D; milk is a source of vitamin D, as well as a number of important proteins and therefore an essential part of the Irish diet (Edwards 1990: 57).

Methods used to create solid dairy products, such as cheese, curds, and butter, were likely to have been discovered at a date before the coming of Christianity; certainly, these foods were already a part of the diet by the time of the earliest Brigidine text (*Vita II* §1). Indeed, the presence of bog butter in Ireland supports the argument that this product was available for a long time before the coming of

Christianity (Cunliffe 1997: 197). Edwards argues that most of the dairy was probably consumed during the summertime, when the animals were lactating and the milk was still fresh (Edwards 1990: 57). However, part of the benefit of butter and cheese was the ability to keep for longer periods under the right conditions (Kelly 1997: 325-330). While a significant portion of the milk yield was going to feed the young animals, Lucas argues that it was vital that the kine be kept away from the calves as much as possible so that the maximum amount of the milk yield could be used for human consumption (Lucas 1989: 15).¹⁸⁶ The portion of milk being used for human consumption could have been further increased by separating the calf from the mother (Green 1992: 33-4). The importance of milk in the diet can be seen in the ninth century triad that defines the three renovators of the world as being 'the womb of a woman, the udder of a cow, and the moulding-block of the smith' (*The Triads of Ireland* §148). Furthermore, one legal text gives an abundant milk yield as a sign of a king's truth, while dryness of milk results from injustice (*Audacht Morainn* §18). Lucas points out that separating the calves from the mother appears to have been the job of children and many Irish saints were recorded as having herded livestock in their childhood (Lucas 1989: 15-16). However, there are also references to adult herders, such as Bishop Rodán, Patrick's herdsman's, whose calves, according to the *Tripartite Life* did 'Nidéndaís alóig acht ani conarleiced-som dóib' (*The Tripartite Life of Saint Patrick* 143.10-11).¹⁸⁷

There were a significant variety of animals that could have produced milk for the Medieval Irish, such as sheep and goats; while it is perfectly possible that these

¹⁸⁶ For a full discussion on the lengths to which Irish pastoralists were willing to go to prevent the calves from reaching their mothers see Lucas (1989: 48).

animals did contribute to diet of dairy products, the main animal used for dairy production appear to have been kine (Edwards 1990: 57). The milk yields of kine at the time probably did not compare with the yields of today. Over the years there has been a process of selective breeding, improved pasture, and less potential shortage of winter-feed which allow modern cattle to be more productive (Edwards 1990: 57). However, the difference may not have been as great as it would first appear. At an Iron Age farm re-enactment at Butser, the Dexter cattle, which are similar to the cattle used in the Iron Age, were able to produce a large yield of milk even on a relatively poor diet (Edwards 1990: 57).

In addition to being a vital source of nourishment, milk also served as a symbol of purity. That the festival of Saint Brigit falls on the same day as the pagan holiday of Imbolc is probably more than coincidence. Of course, we must remember that even though the Saint's day is the same as the holiday, we have no warrant to presume that the pagan celebration was associated with the goddess of the same name. Professor Hamp has argued that the Indo-European root for Imbolc was *uts-molgo, meaning purification, and that it eventually became *ommolg, meaning milking, which would have appeared similar to Oimeic, another term in *Cormac's Glossary* for Imbolc (Hamp 1979/80: 109-11). Because of this, there may be grounds to suspect a link between purity, milk, and the holiday of Imbolc. According to *Cormac's Glossary*, Imbolc was "that is the time the sheep's milk comes. milking i.e. the milk that is milked" (*Cormac's Glossary* 127). However, Ó Catháin and Hamp have rejected this explanation, instead choosing to argue that this may be a

¹⁸⁷ His calves did not do but what was allowed for them; For a full description of the complexities of herding see Lucas (1989: 15-22).

false etymology based on *oí*, meaning ‘sheep’, and *melg*, meaning ‘milk’ (Ó Catháin 1995: 7, Hamp 1979/80 106-07). However, in 1752 the calendar was changed resulting in a loss of eleven days, meaning that Imbolc, and Saint Brigit’s day, would have originally been held in what is now mid-February, a much more like time for the ewes to begin their lambing (Ryder 1983: 679-80). If lambing was associated with Imbolc, *Cormac’s Glossary* does not tell us what the role of the lactating sheep might have been (Ó Catháin 1995: 8). Furthermore, there is no evidence for sheep having a ritual purpose among the Celtic speaking peoples (Powell 1958: 148). While Cormac may not have given us an entirely accurate account of the proceedings of the festival of Imbolc, he did help to reveal the important connection between milk and purity in the minds of the Irish during his time.

It should come as no surprise then that a festival associated with purity would come to have an association with Saint Brigit. We have seen that purity was an essential part of her personality, as in §5 of *Bethu Brigte*, when she was nursed by a white cow with red ears due to the impurity of the druid’s food. Other saints nourished by mystical kine include Cainneach (*VSH I*, I) Coemgen (*VSH I*,ii) and Enda (*VSH II*, xxii). In spite of this purity, these kine did not seem to have any additional financial value above that of any other colour of cattle. While the price of cattle can never be fixed for a very long period, Kelly points out that a *cumal* (female slave) was often given the worth of three milch kine in the legal texts (1997: 58). One early Irish text claims that seven white kine with red ears were worth two *cumals* (*CIH* vi 2114.3), roughly the same price one would expect to have paid for milch kine. More specifically we cannot ignore the fact that the druid feeds her the milk on the grounds that his food is impure, implying that the cow is also a symbol of purity

(*Vita I* §11, *Bethu Brigitte* §5). The white red-eared cow was a symbol of the other world in the Irish saga texts. Although we do not know if Brigit as a goddess possessed any such cattle, we do know that there was a close association with the Morrígan, who owned a herd of white red-eared cattle, and Midir who gambles for fifty of these kine in the *Tochmarc Étaíne* (Lucas 1989: 240-43).¹⁸⁸ However, as a Saint, Brigit was not perceived of as being a part of the pagan past. Indeed, the very reason why the druid was nourishing the child on the cow is because as a pagan the food that he produced was impure.

The meaning of having a Christian saint nourished by a symbol of the other world is intriguing. It occurs as Brigit was being weaned, presumably off her mother's milk, which was itself a symbol of purity (Hamp 1979/80: 111-12). She could not digest normal food because an impure druid offered it to her; the seemingly illogical choice to remedy this problem was to have the Christian child fed by a symbol strongly associated with the non-Christian other world. Whether this was the result of Christian syncretisation of a pagan symbol or whether the Christian authors were simply using a symbol of wealth and purity into the texts, we cannot know. We have seen that Bray has claimed that cows of this colour, sometimes associated with pre-Christian goddesses, has become a heavenly cow in the hagiography. Its dispersal of pure and heavenly milk seems to be symbolic of the milk of salvation which was equalled by Brigit's faith (2000: 295-96). The purity of milk seems to have been an important symbol in the Christian faith. Milk appearing as a symbol of purity occurs again when as a child Brigit was bathed with milk appropriate to 'the

¹⁸⁸ Lucas lists various characters in the texts who have associations with red eared white cattle (1989: 240-43).

brightness and sheen of her chastity' (*Life of Saints from the Book of Lismore* 184.92). We have no evidence of widespread bathing of children in milk until 1171 CE, when Henry II held a church council in Cashel which demanded that children be baptised in churches by priests and states: 'For it was formerly the custom in various parts of Ireland that immediately a child was born, the father or some other person immersed it three times in water and, if it was the child of a rich man, he immersed it three times in milk and after that they threw that water and milk into drains or other unclean places' (translated in: Lucas 1989: 6-7). Lucas points out that this bathing may have been a secular practice, and was not necessarily baptism (Lucas 1989: 7). However, the washing of the child in this manner bore a remarkable similarity to baptism, and was almost certainly a form of washing and thus purification. Whether this bathing in milk was a secular or religious behaviour, the practice was obviously one that was enough of a concern to the church that the practice was banned at that synod.

As well as symbolising Brigit's purity, milk has a close tie to the maternal function of healing. Milk as a tool of healing is not confined to just Saint Brigit, thus David J. Cohen points to a reference in the *Book of Lecan* where milk is described as a cure for poison darts (1977: 123). In addition, wells throughout Ireland have associations with healing and Saint Brigit. Brigit herself used milk as a tool for healing, as in this episode from the *Bethu Brigitte*:

'In fil ni beth mian duit?' ar Brigit.
 'Fil', olsi, 'manam-thi lemlacht, at-bel nunc'.
 Con-gair Brigit cuci ingin, 7 dixit:
 'Tuc dam mo chuad feisin lán, asi n-ibim linn, de uisciu. Du-
 n-uc fot choim'.

Do-breth di-si iarum, 7 sensi combó lemnacht inbrothach, 7 ba
ógslan statim filia ubi gustavit. Condat da firt sin simul, id est lactis
de aqua factis, sanitas filiae.
(*Bethu Brigte* §24)¹⁸⁹

Along with using milk to heal, Brigit also often produced large bounties of dairy products. This ensured not only healing and nurturing, but also that there would be bountiful supplies of food. Transforming milk into dairy products is an extremely difficult process, in addition to which animal husbandry has never been an easy process. Questions such as how many calves to keep and how many to cull, were difficult to answer, largely because there were so many variables, such as the weather or the possibility of raids that could considerably impact on the well-being of the herd. Bad weather in particular was difficult because harsh conditions might mean that there was not enough feed to keep all the calves alive. Dairy was crucial to the diet in Ireland, and there was a great fear of anything that could have a negative impact on the yield of dairy products (Lysaght 1993: 30). Lucas points out that the only references we have to men milking cattle is in the hagiography, when monks, due to an absence of women, were often to be found milking their kine (1989: 43). Kelly cites a number of texts where women were often found manufacturing other dairy products as well, such as butter and cheese (1997: 450 n.85). Due to their familiarity with, and a seemingly miraculous ability to produce solid dairy products out of milk, it would seem a likely choice to have a woman saint protecting milk, and this is precisely what Saint Brigit does.

¹⁸⁹ 'Is there anything in the world that you would desire?' said Brigit. 'There is' she said, 'if I do not have fresh milk, I will die now.' Brigit calls a girl and said, 'Bring to me my own cup, out of which I drink, filled with water. Bring it concealed on your person. It was brought to her then, and she blessed it so that it was warm fresh milk so that she was instantly better when she tasted it. So that those are two miracles at the same moment: that is changing the milk from water and healing the woman.

There are too many specific incidences where she produces large amounts of butter or milk to discuss each one. The first miracle in the *Vita II* (§1), preceded only by the prologue and Saint Brigit's parentage, depicts Brigit giving all the milk and butter that she has churned to the poor and to wayfarers. When Brigit's mother arrives, Brigit prays to God and there is miraculously more butter churned by Brigit than any of the other maidens. In §5 of the *Vita II* Saint Brigit receives some Bishops as guests. As she does not have enough to feed them, she produces three times the amount of milk than is normal from one cow: 'Et quod solet de optimis tribus vaccis exprimi, ipsa mirabili eventu de una sua expressit vacca.' (*Vita II* 779)¹⁹⁰ She was able then to produce for both the poor and the powerful, thus fulfilling a role as maternal figure as well as an authority figure over different levels of society.

In one episode in the *Bethu Brigitte*, the authority that milk production can bring is illustrated dramatically in an incident involving Saint Patrick. Lassar has milked and killed a milch ewe so that she could provide a feast for Brigit. When Patrick arrives there is not enough food for them all; 'Nihil est cibi, duodenis exceptis panibus 7 parco lacte quod tu benedixeras unaque ovicula quae praeparata est tibi. (*Bethu Brigitte* §44)¹⁹¹ However, in spite of this shortage, when they eat, however, there is enough food for them all. The emphasis on dairy aspects is striking. It is clearly stated that the ewe had just been milked, and that a little bit of milk has been blessed. Also being demonstrated is Brigit's virtue, as we have seen hospitality was an extremely important virtue to the Irish that brought prestige to its giver (Bray 1992: 109). Lucas points out that milk was especially important to this

¹⁹⁰ And what is usually milked from three of the best cows she by that miraculous event milked from her one cow. [§5]

hospitality as it consistently receives high placement on lists of food items for guests (1960: 19). Finally, it must be stated that this miracle has a functional aspect: a claim to a church at this site, for it ends with Lassar giving Brigit a church at Cell Laisre; and the story ends by claiming that Brigit is venerated at this site.

While it is fairly clear that a claim to a church for Brigit is the point of this miracle, it is the background to that claim that is interesting. In order for Brigit to successfully make the claim, she needs to show that there is legitimacy in that claim. The legitimacy occurs in two places: first is the fact that Lassar is depicted as actually giving the church to Brigit, which gives Brigit a legal and human claim to the location. The second way Brigit's claim to the church receives verification is when she displays her ability to affect the production of food on that land. While being able to do this does not always indicate a claim to a certain area it would seem in this case to indicate that her claim to this church is both human and divine. Saint Patrick does not make either human or divine claim to this area, so he is not credited with the food production, nor given the church. Having established the closeness between Patrick and Brigit, his presence, as well as being a catalyst for the miracle itself, serves to validate the claim being made by the Brigidine cult.

Cattle

Cattle were the cornerstone of the Irish economy in the early medieval period. They were the main standard of exchange as well as being the main staple of the diet

¹⁹¹ There is no food save for twelve loaves, and a small amount of milk that you have blessed and one lamb that has been cooked for you.

at the time. Of particular importance were kine, which were the main source of milk in early medieval Ireland. In the *Críth Gablach* the *bóaire* was expected to own twenty kine, six oxen and two bulls (*CIH* iii.780.12). Even if we were to assume that the kine were kept alive longer than the bulls for the main reason of producing new offspring, it would still mean that each cow was producing milk, which is, of course, a necessary by-product of bovine reproduction. This milk was obviously of necessity in order to rear any calf; additionally, any extra could be used to contribute to the nourishment of the human community (Edwards 1990: 57).

Cattle were also the measure of wealth in medieval Ireland, as witnessed in §13 of the *Bethu Brigte*, where Brigit gave to a leper a sword that had a value placed at ten kine (*Bethu Brigte* §13).¹⁹² The value of kine extended well beyond being a source of milk; they were also a source of meat, leather, as well as numerous other by-products.¹⁹³ Leather itself had a wide variety of uses, such as containers, clothing, horse tack, fish net floats, boats, and with the introduction of writing – vellum (Green 1992: 41, Kelly 1997: 54).

In the Irish vernacular texts there are numerous references to kine, both sacred and secular. White kine with red ears, such as the herd of 150 that belonged to the Mórrígan in the *Táin Bó Regamna*,¹⁹⁴ and the one that nourished Brigit as a child, are the most obvious manifestation of these other-worldly cattle. These kine were also highly sought after in the ordinary world. Although these kine were viewed as being symbols of the other world, cattle fitting this description most likely existed in Ireland at the time. Indeed, bovines fitting this description exist in Northumbria to

¹⁹² For a full discussion on the value of cows in medieval Ireland see Kelly (1997: 61-66).

¹⁹³ For a full discussion of the various uses of cattle products see Kelly (1997: 53-54).

this day (Bergin 1946: 170; Davidson 1996: 100). This is not to say that cattle of more common colouring were not also important; Davidson points out that there were important kine of more common colouring in the literature, including grey-brown hornless kine, as well as dun and brown coloured cattle such as the Brown Bull in the *Táin* (Davidson 1996: 100). Kelly points out that size of cattle could have played a role in their importance. Larger cattle, while needing more food and being more difficult to handle, also yielded larger carcasses and may well have been seen as status objects. Kelly points out that this argument is supported by the fact that aristocratic sites often produce larger bones than other sites (Kelly 1997: 36). Furthermore, the importance of large cattle is also witnessed by the emphasis on size in the literature, notably the *Táin* where what is effectively an entire war is begun because Medb does not have as large a bull as Ailill's white bull (*TBC LL* ii. 1-146).

Saint Brigit was extremely protective of her cattle. In one episode, cattle rustlers steal a cow from her herd. As they are leaving with the cow, a river rises up in a flood:

Sed eos eamdem revertentes viam impetus ingentis fluminis, inundatione aquarum subito facta, conturbavit. Non enim flumen instar muri erectum scelestissimam boum fraudem beatae Brigidae per se transire permisit; sed eosdem fures demergens et secum trahens, boves de ipsorum manibus liberati, loris in cornibus pendentibus, ad proprium armentorum ad bubulum reversi sunt.
(*Vita II* 282)¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ This is by no means the only reference to an association of the Mórrígan with these cows. For a full description see Lucas (1989: 241).

¹⁹⁵ But as they were going back the same way, the onset of a great river, with a sudden flooding of its waters, threw them into confusion. The river rose like a wall, and did not allow this most criminal theft of holy Brigit's cattle to pass through it. But the same thieves were submerged and were drawn apart. The cows of their own free will, freed from their grasp, the thongs hanging from their horns, returned to their own cattle yards. [§16]

This scene is reminiscent of the incident in the *Lebor Gabála* where Ériu causes the sods and peats of Ireland to rise up against the Sons of Mil (*LGE vol.V* 53. §414). Of course, while Ériu commands nature, in the case of the saint the control of nature is the domain of God, on whose behalf Brigit works. It is interesting to note that Ériu often appeared in the texts as a grey cow with a white muzzle (Hennessy 1870-72: 48). Incidents such as this also appear in the lives of other Irish female saints, notably, Saint Monenna, on behalf of whom the river scalds cattle thieves (*Salmanticensis* 90-91 §24).

The Canons of Adomnán in the Irish penitentials have a more negative view of cattle raiding, declaring: 'Cattle seized in a raid are not to be taken by Christians whether in trade or as gifts for what Christ rejects, how shall the soldier of Christ receive?' (*The Canons of Adomnán* §15) Sometimes we get glimpses of a different attitude. Some hagiographers, while emphasising the saint's ability to protect cattle, are prepared to profit from their subjects' cattle raiding by taking seized cattle as tribute. See, for example, the following passage from the *Life of St. Naile*:

A full-grown beef of every lasting capture
In the raids on your neighbours;
Or if its capture be in [your] land
It is a beef of three handfuls which I am wont
To receive from thee and thy descendants
(*Miscellanea Hagiographica Hibernica* 139)¹⁹⁶

Indeed, Saint Colman mac Lúacháin was said by his biographers to have been invoked by raiders shortly before a cattle raid (*Betha Colmáin Maic Lúacháin* 63-65).

¹⁹⁶ For more examples of churches and monastic sites benefiting from stolen cattle see Lucas (1989: 134-35).

In her lives, Saint Brigit did not rely solely on the land to protect her cattle. When a relative who was ill sent Brigit his best cow, in the hope that she would pray for him to be healed, she asked that the cow be given to Bishop Mel. However, the people delivering the cow tried to deceive her by bringing a different cow of lower quality to the bishop. Brigit got angry at this deception, and threatened that wolves would eat seven of their oxen along with the good cow that they had stolen. The sick relative then gave Brigit ‘vii. n-os de forclu na indesi’(Bethu Brigitte §25).¹⁹⁷ Brigit then gave Mel the seven kine, and she then blessed the sick man who was then subsequently healed.

Protection over the cattle was not only to prevent theft. In the *Bethu Brigitte*, a woman from Fid Éoin was hoping to give Brigit a cow; as she was driving the cow to Brigit the calf became lost. The woman and her companion made the following complaint, ‘Is bec torbai dó ... in bo cen loeg.’ (*Bethu Brigitte* §22)¹⁹⁸ This is probably a reflection of the belief that kine would not give milk without their calves present. When the calf had been slaughtered at a young age, the skin of the calf remained with the cow in the belief that only then would she continue to give milk. Those calves that were not slaughtered were separated from the mother as quickly as possible to ensure the maximum milk yield, however the calf was brought close to the mother at milking time (Lucas 1989: 16). It was common for Irish saints to perform miracles where a cow could give milk without the calf or its skin.; examples of this include Aed (*VSH* i.41), Finnian (*VSH* ii. 93-94), and Ciaran of Clonmacnoise (*VSH* i. 202-03). Brigit reassured them that the calf will return to the mother, which

¹⁹⁷ Seven of the best oxen in the enclosure.

¹⁹⁸ There is little use for it ... the cow without the calf.

eventually happens. Another miracle of this sort occurs in the *Vita II*, when a poor woman breaks apart her loom for firewood and kills a calf to feed Saint Brigit. That night they performed their customary vigils, resulting in a replacement of the loom and the cow making the discovery of another calf (*Vita II* §26).

In addition to protecting the livestock, Brigit also protected those who worked with cattle:

Ba and-sin iccais muntir plepi for ur in mara. Ita factum est.
Alius vir solus laborans in boceto fuit, cui sancta ait cur solus laboraret.
Qui ait:

‘Tota familia mea in dolore est’.

Audiens hoc benedixit aquam, 7 .xii. infirmos fammiliae illius
continua sanavit.

(*Bethu Brigitte* §39)¹⁹⁹

By protecting those who worked with cattle, she was, in essence, protecting the whole of the society. We have established that cattle were the measure of wealth in medieval Irish society. While Brigit is by no means the only saint to protect cattle and those who live off the cattle, she is the most prominent saint to protect the herds on such a frequent basis. As Saint Brigit was the protector of the cattle, she would also be the protector of the wealth that cattle represented and through that earning loyalty of those who relied on cattle.

Pigs and Boars

Irish pigs in the early Middle Ages would have been smaller, hairier, and longer legged than modern pigs, giving them more of the appearance of wild boar.

¹⁹⁹ It was then that she cured the family of a peasant on the edge of the sea. It was done thus. A particular man was working alone in a cow pasture, whom the saint asked why he was labouring alone.

Kelly argues that this change is probably the result of breeding with heavier eastern breeds to create the more familiar breeds that we see today (Kelly 1997: 80). As we shall see, pigs were cherished for their meat, but had little other value. A prosperous farmer, or *mruigfer*, was expected to own only two breeding sows which could be expected to produce more than a dozen piglets. Although swine could not match the importance of cattle in early Christian Ireland, they were, nevertheless, important animals in their own right. Approximately one third of all bones at early Christian sites were from pigs (Kelly 1997: 79) and in the humorous tale of *Scéla Mucce Meic Da Thó* the Ulstermen battle with the warriors of Connacht over the right to carve a pig. We can also see from a ninth century triad that the death of a fat pig was 'one of the three deaths that are better than life' (*Triads of Ireland* 92). Preserved pork may have also been used during the winter as well. Kelly points out that almost half the slaughtered pigs, where it can be shown, were hung and cured, probably with salt, smoke, or both; such preserving would have made for ideal eating during the Irish winter (Kelly 1997: 83-86). Saint Brigit protected these animals in a similar manner to her protection of cattle.

Vita I and *Vita II* both tell a story of a man who offers a gift of his pigs to Brigit (*Vita I* §126, *Vita II* §19). While going home to retrieve them, he sees his pigs being driven along the road towards him, apparently from quite a distance, by wolves. The pigs were unharmed and the wolves left once the delivery had been completed. This would seem to be a curious inversion of the image of the good shepherd. Both texts also tell a story of a wild boar that hid from wolves among

He said: 'All of my family is sick.' Hearing this, she blessed water, and twelve sick family members were healed instantly.

Brigit's herd of pigs. Once there, the boar was blessed by Brigit and became a well-behaved member of the herd:

Cum aper ferus singularis et silvestris territus et fugitivus esset, ad gregem porcorum Brigidae felicissimae concitus cursu praecipiti pervenit. Quem ipsa ventum inter suas cernens benedixit. Deinde impavidus ac familiaris cum ipsius porcorum grege mansit.
(*Vita II* 782)²⁰⁰

In both of these, we see Saint Brigit taming wild animals while in the presence of domestic pigs. As mentioned above, the domestic pig of this time looked similar to the wild boar. Boars were potentially dangerous animals that were often hunted, both for food and as displays of aristocratic abilities (Green 1992: 170). The pigs being driven by the wolves were quite obviously at great risk of being eaten. In addition to the threat to the pigs, the pigs could have wandered off and the owner found guilty of a trespass by the swine. Trespasses by pigs carried a greater punishment because of the pigs' appetite for roots, which would have done greater damage to the property (Kelly 1997: 83). Perhaps Brigit took the greater risk herself when she associated with the wild boar, and allowed it to join her flock. A wild boar could easily kill an armed man, and if it had no longer remained tame, damage could easily have been done to both people and property. However, the boar happily joined the herd of domestic pigs and behaved itself accordingly. These domestic animals, which so closely resembled their wild and more dangerous cousins, must have acted as a constant reminder of how dangerous it was to work with both pigs and all domestic animals. By being able to tame both boars and wolves with these animals,

²⁰⁰ When a solitary, forest dwelling wild boar was once frightened and put to flight, it joined the most blessed Brigit's herd of pigs, having been driven in headlong flight. Seeing it arrived amongst her own pigs, she blessed it. Then it remained with her pigs, passive and tame. [§18]; cf. *Vita I* §107

Saint Brigit shows herself to be a worthy protector of both the animals and their keepers.

In the *Bethu Brigitte*, Brigit plays a more conventional protective role. In §9, her father puts her in charge of the pigs. While in Mag Lifi, he sees that robbers have stolen two of them. Dubthach captures the robbers, and returns home with the pigs. When there, he asks her ‘*In maith ingairi du mucc latt?*’ (*Bethu Brigitte* §9)²⁰¹ She tells him to count the pigs, which he does and he finds that there are no pigs missing. Here we find that Brigit is continuing in her role of simply protecting the animals, similar to the role that she played with cattle.

Sheep

Sheep were less important and less valuable in the early medieval Irish economy.²⁰² In spite of this, they were useful for a number of purposes including skin; which was useful as a bed covering or warm outer garment as well as more typical uses associated with leather such as parchment, as well as meat, and milk. Sheep’s milk was considered to be inferior even to goat’s milk, and was priced for less than goat’s milk accordingly (Kelly 1997: 72). However, the sheep was most useful for its warm and durable wool (Kelly 1997: 67-72). To Christians the sheep and the shepherd are symbols of humanity and our relationship, whether good or bad, with Christ. The parable of the good shepherd is a powerful symbol of Christ’s love

²⁰¹ ‘Do you think you are herding the pigs well?’ I have used Ó hAodha translation here due to some difficulties with this sentence. For more on this see note 1 on page 21.

²⁰² Sheep values are complex, often based on colour, with white sheep being the most expensive at 15 sés, possibly due to rarity of white sheep and the fact that white wool can be dyed. For a complete discussion of sheep value see Kelly (1997: 70).

for all humanity, especially those who have strayed (Kelly 1997: 67-72). This parable is reflected in the final miracle of the *Bethu Brigitte* (§46). Brigit goes to stay with a nun called Fíne, at her site that was to be named Cell Fhíne in modern day Killeen Cormac, Co. Kildare. Fíne attempts to find a nun who will go and pasture the sheep in the midst of a severe storm. All of Fíne's virgins refuse, but fortunately, Brigit volunteered for the job. Fíne protests, but Brigit heads out, chanting a verse, and causes the weather to clear:

Foidis alali ógh craibdech co Brigti ara tessed Brigit dia aithrius. Fine nomen eius. Is dia anmaim ro-ainmnigthi Chell Fine. Luid dana 7 anais sin. Laae n-and dí du-fuburt gaeth 7 flechud 7 torann 7 saignen.

'Cia uaib indiu, a ingena, regus liar caerchu iss doninn moir-si?'

Puellae omnes pariter recusabant. Brigita respondit:

'Ego oves pascere nimis dilego'.

'Nolo ut exeas', ar Fine.

'Mea voluntas fiat', ar Brigit.

Luid-si iarum 7 gabsi rand occo:

Rom-bith laithi solus lat,
ar at coeman, at rigmac;
ardo maithir Mairi mboid
aurgair flechud, aurgair gaith.

Do-gena dam-sa mo rí,
ní firge flechud choidchí,
fo bithin Brigti indiu
teti sund dond ingariu.

Pluviam 7 ventum sedavit.

(*Bethu Brigitte* §46)²⁰³

²⁰³ A certain holy nun sent to Brigit, so that Brigit might visit her. Her name was Fine. It is from her name that Cell Fine is named. She went there and she stayed there. Then on a certain day, rain and wind and thunder and lightning settled in. 'Which of you, O girls, will go today with our sheep into this great storm?' All the girls were equally hesitant. Brigit said: 'I very much love to herd sheep.' 'I do not want you to go', said Fine. 'Allow my desire', said Brigit. She went then, and recited verse at it: 'Let there be for me a clear day with you / for you are a close friend, a young king / for the sake of your mother Mary ..? / forbid wind, forbid rain // My King will do it for me / rain will not fall until evening / for the sake of Brigit today / who is going here to do the herding: He stilled the rain and the wind.'

While Brigit ultimately does not have to face the weather, she is still the only one willing to do the job; indeed it is her faith and fortitude that alter the weather. The weather working is also independent of the parable, but is reminiscent of a number of saints who invoke God to work the weather for them. One of the best known examples being Patrick's encounter with the druids of Tara:

...et dixit magus: 'Ego inducam uidentibus cunctis.' Tunc incantationes magicas exorsus induxit niuem super totum campum pertingentem ferenn et uiderunt omnes et mirati sunt. Et ait sanctus: Ecce uidemus hoc, depone nunc.' Et dixit: 'Ante istam horam cras non possum deponere.' Et ait sanctus: 'Potes malum et non bonum facere. Non sic ego.' Tunc benedicens per totum circuitum campum dicto citius absque ulla pluia aut nebulis aut uento euanuit nix...
(Muirchú I 20 (19) 3-5)²⁰⁴

Of course, the difference is that while Patrick is fighting for Christ's control of Ireland, Brigit is simply, on the face of it, controlling the weather to be able to herd sheep. However, this appearance can be deceiving. The proximity of this monastery to Kildare would have made it an important one for the Brigidine federation. To have such a nearby monastery under the control of another *paruchia* would have been an uncomfortable situation for Kildare. Its position as the last miracle in the text gives it an important position in the text. For example, Cogitosus, who was eager to promote the interests of Kildare, saved the miracles based at Kildare until the end of his text (*Vita II* §31-Epilogue).

We do not know if this site was a contested one or not, but by putting Brigit in the position of the good shepherd, showing her mastery of the weather, and then

²⁰⁴ And the druid said: 'I will incite it [to snow] in the sight of everyone. Then beginning magical chants, he brought snow over all of the field reaching to a man's belt, and all who saw were amazed. The saint said, 'We see this, now remove it'. And [the druid] said, 'Before this hour tomorrow, I cannot remove it'. The saint said, 'You do evil and you do not do good. Not so I.' Then he blessed the field by means of encircling it, and in no time, without rain, nor clouds nor wind the snow disappeared.

placing this episode at the end of the text, Brigit is shown as the master of this site. She has achieved it not by showing that her control of the weather is a great and mighty force with which to conquer druids but that her weather control simply is protective of shepherds. Indeed, in §4 of the *Vita II* Brigit's reapers were spared any rain during the harvesting while the surrounding farms were caught in the poor weather.

In the two Latin texts we see again the similar pattern of St. Brigit protecting the herd (*Vita I* §101, *Vita II* §7). In both of these episodes, Brigit is the victim of a boyish prank. In this passage, a boy fools Brigit into thinking that he is poor, and when he asks for a sheep, he is given one. Seven times the boy repeats this trick, but to no avail. At the end of the evening, the sheep are found to be with the flock, and the boy is left without.

Horses

Unlike the animals mentioned so far, Kelly maintains that horses were not, as far as we can tell, widely valued for their meat (1997: 352). The CIH states that horse and dog flesh have no value, which indicates that it was not widely eaten, and there are few references to their being eaten (Kelly 1997: 352).²⁰⁵ The legal sources mostly concentrate on the use of horses for warfare and racing (Kelly 1997: 89). This is not to say that horseflesh was never eaten. Indeed, there is evidence that horses were eaten, even in monastic sites such as in Moyne in Co. Mayo and Church Island in Co. Kerry. This is in spite of an Old Irish Penitential which prescribes three and a half years penance for eating horseflesh. Indeed, the very outlawing of an act

indicates that it was an activity that had to some extent been practised. This prohibition, which has no biblical precedence, may be in response to ritual horse consumption, such as was described by Giraldus Cambrensis in his *History and Topography of Ireland* (sec 3; §102).

However, training horses to work with people is a difficult and arduous process. They need a proper diet to maintain their energy, and a gentle guiding hand rather than brute force to train them. The gentle nature of Brigit allows her to master the domestication of horses with ease. The *Vita I* is the text which most heavily concentrates on horses. In §50, her charioteer is preaching to Brigit while he drives the chariot. She instructs him to face her saying that while he does this, the horses will go to their destination without his aid. While this happens, one of the horses loses the yoke, and begins to walk behind the chariot. A king notices this saying ‘Brigita orans sedet in isto curro equorum oblita; Dominum solum animo intendit.’ (*Vita I* 26.7-8)²⁰⁶ The horse, on hearing the admiration of the crowd, put himself under the yoke again, which causes the people to praise Brigit even further.

§72 of *Vita I* is a long and complex tale, which tells of travellers accompanying an anchorite, who has vowed not to look on the face of women. Because of the anchorite’s vow, they do not seek Brigit’s blessing when they pass where she is staying. They later lose their baggage, and realise that it is because they did not seek her blessing. They fast and then go to seek her blessing. Fortunately for them, it turns out that Brigit has found their baggage. She returned their bags to them, and then accompanied them on their trip. However, she felt sorry for them and

²⁰⁵ For more information about consumption of horse meat see Kelly (1997: 352).

²⁰⁶ Brigit sits praying in that chariot, unaware of the horses; she thinks only of God [§50].

as a result, horses appear and allow them to put their baggage on them. At the end of the journey, Brigit instructed them to release the horses. The horses then ran off leaving the travellers; it is not mentioned if the horses were wild or domestic. The story goes on to tell of how Brigit saves a baby from an eagle and helped the anchorite, whose vow prevents the people from securing the blessing of Brigit, to secure a place to stay on an island.

There is one episode where a horse actually causes harm, albeit with positive results, to Brigit. In §29 of the *Bethu Brigitte* Brigit was thrown from her chariot while fording a river while looking for a physician.²⁰⁷ The author points out that there is no particularly good reason for the horses to be frightened. The result of this fall is that her head is healed and that the stone on which she hit her head has become a place of healing. Furthermore, we have seen that her position as holier than Mel is established when he realised that he should not have instructed Brigit to see a physician.

She also protected horses in a manner similar to the methods she used to protect other animals. In §57 of the *Vita I*, thieves had taken Brigit's horses. She heard them but did nothing because she knew that the thieves could hurt her and her nuns. The thieves then stole seed corn from a neighbour's granary. After the thieves escaped, they believed that they have returned home. However, they instead found themselves at a hut owned by Brigit. The neighbours traced the thieves to the hut, and when they are caught, Brigit sent for Patrick who releases the thieves and allowed them to repent.

²⁰⁷ In *Vita I* §29, a similar miracle occurs, although it is only stated that she falls out of her chariot. There is no reason given as to why she does so.

Conclusion

Much of any saint's authority within Ireland rested on their propagandists ability to promote the political ambitions of their cult. While they were unable to promote her interests in the same manner as most male saints, Brigit's biographers did, nevertheless find ways of allowing Brigit to be a powerful and dominant figure within the church in Ireland. The principal image which they used to promote these interests was charity and giving. By donating gifts and hosting feasts, Brigit showed herself to be a figure to contend with in early Ireland. While she may not have been as dramatic as Patrick at Tara, she was nevertheless able to assume a degree of power by keeping those around her in her debt while punishing those who did not realise the importance of the generosity that she offered. For example, we have seen that Lassar was faced with no option but to repay Brigit by donating her church to her.

In addition to validating her control over certain areas of Ireland, Brigit also acted as a general protector of food and livestock. Of particular importance to the lives was beer, which acted as an agent whereby she ensured her control over her *paruchia*. While it is a possibly that this may be an echo of the Irish sovereignty goddess, the Brigidine authors clearly are defining this image with Christian language. Also important was milk, which in addition to being a staple of the diet, was also a food associated with purity. She also protected cattle and other livestock. In a society without coinage, livestock were especially important as the measure of wealth. In protecting food, drink, and livestock Brigit became a protector of wealth.

Given the donations that she received from people in the texts, it would seem likely that her protective position may well have resulted in greater wealth for her *paruchia*.

Conclusion

The three earliest lives of Brigit give us a unique glimpse at the world of early Christian Ireland. Of course, this thesis does not aim to draw comprehensive conclusions about early Ireland based on a limited number of texts about one exceptional person. Indeed, the most that we can conclude about Brigit through this literary reading of her lives is a richer understanding of how the figure of Brigit operates within her own *vitae*. In order to gain this understanding we needed to understand the background in which these texts were written. There were various reasons for writing the texts, and this thesis did not attempt to identify and understand all of them. Naturally, we cannot comprehend the personal motives of the individual authors. But it has been possible to recognise what the broader aims of our texts were and how the figure of Brigit is used within the texts to try to achieve these aims.

The first section of this thesis aimed to place Brigit within the broadest possible understanding of the cult of saints. It then proceeded to examine how this cult, as well as other aspects of the new faith, notably monasticism, became established in Ireland, and how they subsequently developed in this unique part of Western Europe. The social and physical geography of Ireland was considerably different from the areas of Western Europe that had defined the organisational characteristics of Western Christendom. Rather than an urban, episcopally based system, the rural character of Ireland lent itself better to a monastically organised church. However, this does not mean that the pastoral aspects of the church were forgotten, as, recent research by Sharpe (1984), Etchingham (1991, 1999), and Charles-Edwards (1992, 2000)

The cult of saints was an important part of that pastoral aspect. The events of the Bible had occurred, at least for the Irish, in a distant and exotic place. The saints fostered a localised development of the Christian religion. Rather than happening in distant places that most adherents would never be able to see, the saints, whether historical or not, were usually local and relevant. The texts which celebrated these pious people were written by monastic scribes for an audience familiar with the social, economic, and political workings of early Ireland. In localising the faith, the *vitae* helped people to both connect directly, through the use of relics, with the other world; the saint's presence in both heaven and the relics allowed them to act as intercessors for the adherent. As well as an intercessory role, saints also acted as a culturally relevant exemplar for the faithful to follow.

In order to do this, the saint must be established as a holy figure. In the case of Brigit, we find that her childhood adheres to the international pattern of the heroic biography. This process marks her out for specialness. Brigit was shown as being special even before she was born, and this specialness had to be recognised by both pagans and clergymen. Her liminal birth and her holy nature even as a child were recognisable signs of a heroic personage. One very clear marker of this was her association with fire. As is manifest in the case of the apostles and other Biblical figures from both the old and New Testament, fire that does not burn is a symbol that God is present. In the lives of Brigit, this phenomenon occurs throughout her childhood, and even seems to act as a substitute for baptism. It ceases only once she takes the veil. In Lévi-Straussian terms Brigit was transformed from a "raw" to a "cooked" state, the fire making the girl into a holy Christian figure.

Her holiness was qualified by her gender. Although no consistent explanation was given, there was a general agreement in the early church that women were more prone to sin and lust than men. As a result, they faced a greater struggle to overcome their natural human sinful tendencies. This is often seen in the hagiography; continental female saints often go to great extremes to overcome the flesh. To become more holy they had to become more masculine. However, Brigit's masculinity seems to come from her being a bishop, as well as from being a part of an earlier, and therefore holier generation of saints. Therefore, she was spared these extremes of avoidance of the flesh. However, she did not escape from her gender. As women in early Ireland were associated with work near or in the home, many of the miracles that Brigit performs are close to the home. Simple miracles of healing, abundance, and protection are not the same as the almost military encounters of her male counterparts. However, the Brigidine authors were able, through her kindness and generosity, to promote the interests of their cult.

To help us more fully understand the particular image of Brigit we examined the relation between Patrick and Brigit, which must at some level represent the relationship between Armagh and Kildare. To recapitulate, we saw claims to joint sovereignty on the part of Patrick and Brigit occurring at roughly the same time as the respective monasteries of Armagh and Kildare were making national claims for themselves. The most likely explanation for this coincidence of history and hagiography is that the national claims made in the hagiography need to be considered in the light of the historical joint rule as described in the *Liber Angeli*. Such joint rule would allow either side of the argument to make such a claim to national rule.

As advocates of Brigit's *paruchia* the authors of the lives needed to defend the claims of the Kildare in the texts. Brigit's gender rendered less appropriate the martial methods that her male counterparts used to claim *paruchia*. The alternative chosen was the feast. By comparing the potlatch system, as described by Mauss and O'Leary, we were able to see how Brigit's giving of foodstuffs allowed her to put those in power, such as druids, kings, and other saints, into her debt, while the protection of livestock and other food goods would have promoted her popularity in a society that depended explicitly on these goods for survival. Those who did not share in the charitable nature of Brigit were often made to suffer, either by loss of their own ability to produce, or sometimes even by loss of life. Nevertheless, Brigit was seen as such an effective provider of bounty that it helped her to become one of the most popular saints in Ireland.

Brigit has remained one of the most popular saints in Ireland throughout history. While this work examines only the earliest lives of Brigit, there remains a large amount still to be done. The most pressing need in Brigidine studies is with a new edition of the Latin *Vita II*, the most recent one being by Migne in the *Patrologia Latina* (72). In addition, these early lives still need to be more closely examined with the intention of understanding the political motives behind the lives, along the line of *Iona, Kells and Derry*. While this thesis begins to touch upon it, a more exhaustive study is still needed, for instance a study on the agreement between Armagh and Kildare, and how this relationship affected the rest of Ireland. Furthermore, the Brigidine tradition is widespread throughout the continent, and despite studies of local interest by Breeze (1988) and Young (1998), more work needs to be done in this area. Furthermore, this study ceases with the ninth century

Old Irish text, however, there is a rich corpus of Brigidine texts reaching into later periods. Indeed, while Ó Catháin has focused on the modern folklore surrounding Brigit (1995), more focused study of the tradition in the intervening period is necessary to fill an obvious gap.

The aim of this study is not to prove or disprove the pagan roots of Brigit, or even to prove whether or not she existed. It is a much more humble aim than that. One indisputable fact about Saint Brigit is that she was seen as a proper and pious Christian person, who amongst other things was a model of Christian behaviour. In this examination, it is hoped that we can see how the saint was constructed in a number of ways to meet the needs of her cult and the authors of the texts. Of particular importance is the understanding of the social context in which the life was written, and how the *vitae* as a literary form reflect the concerns and tensions of that society

Bibliography

Abbreviations used

CMCS	Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies
EC	Études Celtiques
ITS	Irish Texts Society
JRSAI	Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland
PRIA	Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy
RC	Revue Celtique
SC	Studia Celtica
SH	Studia Hibernica
ZCP	Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie

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